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LETTERS

Letters
K
CONCERNING THE

RELIGION

ESSENTIAL TO

M A N:

As it is Distinct from what is merely
an ACCESSION to it.

IN TWO PARTS.

Translated from the FRENCH.

GLASGOW,

Printed for ROBERT URIE.

MDCCLXI.

®

LETTERS

THE

RELIGION

M. A. N.



EXHIBIT

NUMBER

4

TO THE

Moderate and Unprejudiced READERS.

GENTLEMEN,

I OFFER this little essay to your examination. If it wants protection, it may expect more from you, than from any other sort of readers.

To whom but you, could I venture to present a work where every kind of erudition is wanting *? a work where there are no citations out of authors, nor in short any thing that passes under the name of authorities? What can be more flat and insipid than such a book, to professed scholars, to those men of polite literature, who know how to enrich their productions with such things? I must own however, it is not only the learned who require authorities, but also the unlearned. They look upon him to be a very rash man who dares to think by himself, or to suspect that our ancestors could possibly be mistaken. It would be in vain to tell them, we appeal to the authority of good sense: in their opinion, good sense is an exceptionable judge.

* Let us explain this, that it may not be mistaken for the affected modesty of the author. We mean here by erudition only what is afterwards expressed by the words citations, authorities, and in general, whatever favours of study and school-learning.

I know, gentlemen, you have a very different way of thinking ; the antiquity and vogue of an opinion, give it no weight with you : you are not afraid of making a thorough enquiry into the truth or falshood of received opinions ; you know by experience, that such an enquiry never hurts truth ; it only destroys error, which is the very thing you aim at.

I have, therefore, no reason to fear, that what may be new, or singular in this Work, will offend you merely on that account.

Nor do I think it necessary to ask your indulgence, for the irregularities which you will doubtless observe in this book. It is inconsistent with your character, to cavil about what is mere form. Want of method, a negligent stile, unusual expressions, pass not with you for unpardonable crimes. You go strait to the point ; and judge of a work by the substance and real worth of it. You perfectly see how far the consequences of principles laid down as fundamental, will carry one : and by this touchstone, you judge of what is good or evil, of the good or bad impression, which a book may make upon the minds of men.

I do not think, gentlemen, that I ought to ask your protection for this essay ; value it just as it deserves. If it tends not to promote the general good, if the consequences of it are dangerous, condemn it without mercy. Should that happen, I now promise, that I will most readily submit, and shall continue to be, as I am at present, with the greatest esteem,

Gentlemen, your most humble, etc.

*A LETTER from the Author to the Editors,
to give them some Idea of his Work.*

GENTLEMEN,

IT is reasonable to give you some idea of the work, which I offer you : you will thereby judge, whether it is proper for you to publish it.

I ought first to tell you what gave occasion to it. It was the difficulty which you will find in the beginning of this work, and which was started to the author by several persons, concerning the principle of a self-sufficient Being *. It is objected to him that by this same principle, the pretended free-thinkers endeavour to sap the foundation of religion, and even to ruin morality, or, at least, to indulge themselves in such an excessive freedom, as degenerates into libertism.

Some of the consequences they deduce from this principle are here examined ; consequences which at first view, are somewhat dazzling, and seem to flow pretty naturally from the principle of the self-sufficient Being.

But when we come to view the matter closely, we are led very naturally to consequences quite opposite to the former ; for we are led to conclude, that the principle of the self-sufficient Being far from sapping the foundation of religion, or tending to the ruin of morality, is the firmest basis of both.

I go still farther, and attempt to prove that the religion essential to man, can have no other founda-

* A principles which he had laid down in the introduction to the book of the fourteenth letters.

tion ; that every particular opinion, which is independent of that principle, or may be opposite to it, is foreign to the essential religion.

This is a general idea of the design of the whole work.

It will not, perhaps, be well understood for what this design can be useful. Let us explain it.

We observe, that men are consistent in the affairs of life, but not in what concerns religion. Upon enquiring into the reason of it, we find it to be this, That they have an entire certainty with regard to the affairs of life, and have very little certainty in matters of religion.

We examine whether no remedy can be found for this inconvenience ; whether religion be not susceptible of a kind of evidence, of a certainty proportionable to the nature of moral things.

We observe, that there can be no certainty but in that which is evidently founded on very simple and unquestionable principles.

And as all true principles must depend upon one only principle, to this we have recourse as to the root or stock that bears all the branches.

This only principle is that of a self sufficient Being.

In general, the author's whole system turns upon a single proposition *, which is no sooner advanced, than good sense embraces it.

The proposition is, that every relation between two intelligent beings is necessarily founded in the nature of both. Now religion is essentially no more than a relation between God and man. It can therefore be founded only in the nature of these two beings.

* This proposition is found in the body of the work.

From hence the author thinks it may justly be concluded, that every point of doctrine, every opinion, which is evidently opposite, as well to the nature of God, as to that of man, ought to be deemed false, or at least foreign to the essential religion.

These are the conclusions, which serve in the course of the work, as a rule or standard, for judging of the truth or falshood of the different subjects that come under examination.

Had the author begun these letters with a design to make a book of them, he would doubtless have placed this proposition in the beginning of it. This would have been a text very fruitful in consequences, and would have enabled him to discard every thing that the same rule could not admit.

But having at first proposed only to answer the objections which were started to him, he was thereby led into digressions, which probably would not have been thought necessary, had he laid down a methodical plan.

Though this work is not written in a systematical form, it may be perceived, notwithstanding a sort of irregularity which prevails in it, that it contains a system connected in all its parts; and it is besides easy to perceive, that the connection of this system is not the effect of art, but is the natural result of the unity and simplicity of the principles, or rather of the principle upon which it is built. Accordingly the author has not discovered the whole chain of his work, but in proportion as the consequences offered themselves.

One of his first ideas with regard to religion, and which evidently follows from the principles which he embraces, is, that religion must be within the reach of man, and at the same time bear a relation to the natural capacity with which the Author of his being

has endowed him. This being laid down, he first infers, that the religion essential to man must be simple, evident, free from all contradiction ; that it must exclude every thing either false or imaginary ; that it cannot require any man to strain his belief to what favours of an impossibility, much less to what favours of a contradiction.

This is what the whole work relates to. But one observation must be made, viz. that the author finds it a harder task to destroy error, than establish truth. And indeed to begin with removing error, would perhaps be the surest and least equivocal way to arrive at truth. If we were so happy as to succeed in this attempt, truth would appear of itself ; there would be no need of labouring much to discover it.

It will be easily conceived, that an idea of religion, as I defined it, must meet with great opposition from prejudice, and opinions vulgarly received. And this gives occasion to some inquiries, which the essential religion might very well dispense with *.

Men, when they go off from the end which they ought to propose, take many useless turns and windings : we are, as it were, forced to follow them through the same windings, when we undertake to bring them back to that end. This has occasioned all the digressions, which the author was obliged to make.

To begin with throwing aside prejudice, he supposes a man who never had any instructor in matters of religion ; a man who consults himself, to discover

* This remark may be found in the twenty-seventh letter. Notwithstanding the inconvenience of repetition, we think fit to place it here ; because it is very proper for the beginning, and the reader must wait a long while, before he comes to that letter.

the cause and end of his being, and who, pursuing this examination, is led from one consequence to another, to own a first Being, a supreme cause.

Hereupon this man is introduced into society, and is attentive to what passes in it. The mixture of good and evil, the confusion which he sees prevailing there, lead him to new remarks, to conclusions of another kind.

We afterwards come to examine how we must prepare such a man for embracing the revealed or christian religion ; and we conclude, that there can be no other way but that of examination.

For this purpose we propose two different methods : the first, founded upon the authority which the written revelation may receive from the external and miraculous testimonies which attended at : the second, founded upon an authority from itself, from the characters of truth, which every unprejudiced man may discover in it. We observe that the first method is liable to many inconveniencies, that it gives those who love disputing an opportunity of raising endless difficulties ; and therefore we resolve to follow the latter.

What we first lay down, is the possibility of a divine revelation. Afterwards we examine the usefulness of it ; we shew that it would answer several good purposes ; and from thence we come to examine, whether it is true that what is contained in the book, called written revelation, may really be advantageous to man. In that book, we observe several subjects :

First, the historical, or relations of facts. 2dly, Clear and undoubted truths, to which common sense bears testimony. 3dly, Things necessary intermixed with obscurity, and the end of which is not evident.

4thly, lastly, Things utterly obscure, which are called mysteries.

We pass slightly over what concerns the historical subjects. We do not dwell long on the truths, which are clear and undoubted ; besides that they prove themselves, the whole of this work having no other foundation, we are obliged to have often recourse to them *. The truths of the third class furnish matter for a long examination. By things called accessary, and the end of which is not discovered, we mean all those counsels which seem harsh, the practice of which is very difficult, and the justice or usefulness of which do not appear at first sight.

Here we go back to a principle, which was already laid down, namely, that the free and intelligent capacity, with which God had indued man, is of such a nature, that it is impossible for him to acquiesce in what appears to him unjust. From thence we conclude, that unless we find a means of vindicating these evangelical counsels, from the harshness imputed to them, nothing would be more unreasonable, than to require any man to acquiesce in them. We proceed further, and affirm, that God will never require it, that it would be disowning his own workmanship, and rendering useless the most excellent faculties where-with he has indued human nature ; namely intelligence and liberty.

We afterwards examine the counsels of Jesus Christ, those which run counter to the most favourite inclinations, which attack our love of false pleasures, of riches, honours, etc. It is not denied, but that such maxims seem to be too rigorous. And when

* And even so often, that several people may take it for repetition.

we join to these, the maxims which invite us to take up the cross, and to suffer persecution, here we ask ourselves, what pleasure a Being supremely good can take, not only in forbidding men the sweetest satisfactions of life, but likewise in loading them with real punishments? Thus far it is impossible to find any justice in such a conduct.

From thence we pass to a more particular examination. We repeat a remark, which had been already made upon the use of revelation; viz. that it is possible, revelation may be, with regard to men, what education is with respect to children. We then come to another remark; viz. that the education which is bestowed upon children, relates much more to the future than the present time; that in this last respect, it comprehends a thousand painful things, which it is very difficult to practise, which curb the inclinations of children, subdue their desires, and the use and justice of which they are far from owning.

This observation may, in some measure, shew us, that it would not be impossible to justify the evangelical counsels. Could we demonstrate, that they relate to another time, to a period of greater importance to man than that of this life, the end of these counsels would be no longer ambiguous.

In the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth letters, we enter into a farther examination of this point. These letters will not displease those who have a taste for truth, and who prefer what is useful, to what is merely curious.

The thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth letters treat of the subjects of the last class; namely, things which are obscure or mysterious. I think, it is better to refer the reader to those letters, than to give

an extract of them here. I shall only observe, that if the divines of different parties could resolve to consider in the same light, all the impenetrable passages of scripture, many divisions and controversies would be ended.

After the examination of things which are obscure, we are led to that of a question, which is not free from obscurity ; viz. concerning faith. And in effect, it must be a very knotty question, since no subject in the world has occasioned more controversies, more dissensions among divines, and more reciprocal accusations of heresy. We are therefore obliged to pave a way for ourselves. The reason of this is not difficult to be found. It is, that what we call beaten paths, cross one another, they are all opposite, and necessarily destroy each other : and if we would give credit to the sticklers for these opposite paths, what would result from their suffrages collected together ? what could it be but this, that we must beware of chusing any of them, since they all lead to error *. This cannot be denied, they ought to prove what they advance, and we must determine accordingly. We do so to the best of our power, without being scrupulous to avoid singularity, since it is likewise inevitable here.

But will not this new path be in the same case with the others ? will it not be liable to the same in-

* If we take these suffrages on the negative side, it is evident that they exclude each other. It is true, that if we take the same suffrages on the positive-side, it would follow, that we must chuse at once the most opposite paths. Now, as this is impossible, we are obliged to take them on the negative-side.

conveniencies ? this we must leave undecided, and the reader may inform himself of it †.

We are come now to the end of the first part, which contains twenty letters. The second contains as many ; and as it is preceded by a kind of advertisement, or preliminary discourse, giving an idea of the end which the author proposed in it, I need not speak of it here.

This little sketch, gentlemen, should give you the curiosity to see the whole manuscript, it will not be difficult to transmit it to you.

I have thought it unnecessary to speak to you concerning the stile. The only thing, which it is fit to tell you before-hand, is, that certain expressions, which I have used to make myself understood, may not exactly agree with the rules of language. Those, who are skilled in that subject, will easily observe, that the author is not ; but they may likewise observe, that though he sometimes makes use of unusual expressions, he does not confound his ideas.

One thing further must be said, namely, that upon reading the first letter, wherein we answer the difficulties started by the free-thinkers, it might be expected that the sequel would likewise concern them, or at least, a considerable part of it would be employed against them. But we say no more of them. It is true this appears irregular ; and we have accordingly observed, that the author is not methodical. However, this work, without attacking the free-thinkers directly, may indirectly strike at their principles ; and this will appear in the following introduction.

† See the sixteenth and following letters, to the end of the first part.

THE INTRODUCTION.

NEVER was infidelity more strongly attacked than it has been in our days : but do we see the number of unbelievers diminished on that account ? the contrary seems rather to be true, and that the more they perceive weapons hammered out and prepared against them, the more strenuous efforts do they make to put themselves in a posture of defence. The bare title of a book, which seems to point at them, is a sufficient warning for them to be on their guard : far from being convinced upon reading it, they know before hand, every thing that they are to say in answer to it.

The truth is, that the ordinary proofs which are taken from external evidences or miracles, are trite arguments, the force of which they can easily evade.

Whatever relates to facts very distant from our time, to them appears highly suspicious. We are not to be surprized at this ; since even the things which happen in our days, provided the least extraordinary circumstance attend them, are but very little credited. The reason alleged for this sort of incredulity, is the little stress that is to be laid on bare relations, on what they call public reports.

* It is to be observed, that a man who pleads a cause, will never be convinced by the pleadings of his adversary. The case in question is pretty much the same.

It is known for an unquestionable truth, that pretended facts, attested by men worthy of credit, who gave themselves out for eye witnesses of them, after being more strictly enquired into by the very same persons, have been discovered by them to be false.

The reason is, that these well meaning people were deceived by the artifice of those whose interest it was to impose upon them.

There are numberless instances of this kind. What we call hear-say, becomes every day more liable to suspicion. We often find, that in a great city, one whole quarter of it shall ring with the noise of a pretended event, that is said to have happened in another quarter, where it has not been so much as heard of.

Examples of the like nature have produced such an effect, that many people know not whether they ought to believe their own eyes : and it is very certain, that if the question was to be about some effect that should seem to have any miraculous circumstance in it, they would not rely upon what they see *.

* Although it could be supposed, that miracles might be wrought in our days, exactly like those mentioned in the gospel, we have all the reason in the world to presume that little credit would be given to them. What proof can we draw from the raising of a dead man to life, or the healing of sick persons? perhaps it may be all a trick. Or granting that it is not, what hinders but that it may be the effect of some natural cause? this pretended dead man who rises again, was only in a lethargy, and not actually dead : there is nothing more common than instances of this kind. As for the sudden cures of divers distempers, nature alone is sufficient to work them ; she has such revolutions, and now and then such exceptions to the ordinary rules, as border somewhat upon miracles. Now to be well assured that such or such effects are true miracles, a man should be able

In general, we might divide the world into two opposite classes. The more that such as come under the denomination of the vulgar, shew themselves ready to be caught by the marvellous, and to give headlong into what has the least appearance of it; the more do persons who distinguish themselves from the vulgar, and who have the use of thinking, incline to the contrary extreme *.

We have therefore no reason to be surprized, if the proofs which are drawn from facts, make but a small impression on the minds of men in this age. With respect to religion especially, they have taken a different turn: and if we would be favourably heard by them, we must suppose them such as they really are, and take hold of them where we can.

I am strongly inclined to believe, that if religion can be represented to them in such a light as to make them reverence and esteem it, this will never be by grounding it on proofs of a foreign nature: it can only be by an authority taken from itself, independent of any other, and which in that respect may be liable to no equivocation.

to demonstrate, that neither fraud nor nature could be the cause of them.

* Such is the disposition of men now-a-days, of those, I mean, who are allowed to have the greatest share of good sense. As for the multitude, they will ever be blindly credulous, they want no proofs. But since the question is here about persons who are delicate on this head, about persons who love to sift every thing thoroughly by themselves, it would be ridiculous for a man to pretend to make such proofs as are drawn from facts that happened 16 or 17 centuries ago, pass with them for good-ones; since they would even disallow of proofs grounded on facts that happen in our own time.

In effect, there is a great difference between embracing truth for the sake of its own evidence, and acquiescing in the testimony which other men give to it. An example will make the thing more plain.

You present a mass of gold to me, and produce the certificate of a croud of ancestors, all of them remarkable for their integrity, who affirm it to be real gold, and who, as we shall suppose besides, could not have been mistaken in the matter.

If the mass in question was of small value, I might very possibly content myself with this kind of testimony, without troubling myself much about thoroughly examining it.

But if it was a thing on which my whole fortune depended, it is very certain, that no attestation of this sort would satisfy me, and that I would seek other proofs. In that case, I should answer you thus :

Without pretending to invalidate the testimonies which you bring to convince me that this metal is real gold, I would ask you whether it was not possible for us to judge of it by our own eyes, in the same manner as our ancestors judged of it by theirs ? I repeat it once more ; have not we in our own hands a sure way of distinguishing false gold from true, without leaving any room for a mistake ? if this be the case, as it certainly is, I conclude that I must bring it to the trial ; I ask no other testimonies.

The question is then, whether truth has not some marks about itself, by which we may know, and discern it, without having recourse to any foreign authority whatsoever.

Supposing this to be the case, will not referring men to such a trial be the surest method of going

to work, especially if we are to deal with those persons, who being very little given to credulity, insist upon seeing things with their own eyes.

This is precisely what the author aimed at in the method he has chosen to point out the Religion essential to Man. He has made it his business to rid it of every thing that is not part of itself, being persuaded that, when viewed alone, it has all that is necessary to make it esteemed and revered.

In effect it cannot be doubted, but that the things which give many persons a handle to turn it into ridicule, are the additions which men have made to it, as well as the feeble props, and the equivocal proofs on which they pretend to establish it.

Remove from it all these covers, all these foreign props, which it has nothing to do with ; fear not that it will stand the less firm on that account, nothing can shake the foundation of it. But where is this foundation to be found ? in the nature of God, and in that of man both at the same time.

This, methinks, would leave no pretence nor handle to those nice persons who believe nothing upon slight grounds, and who are for measuring the truth of what is advanced by the standard of their own judgments.

My notion is, that in granting them all that they can ask, we should thereby lay them under the necessity of granting in their turn what they cannot disown, without acting contrary to their own sentiments. In this manner would I address myself to them :

You find that the miracles on which others ground the gospel, are not a sufficient proof for you. You observe that there is no false religion whatsoever, which is not grounded on miracles, and these too in a very great number ; that all religions produce pro-

phets, whose predictions have been confirmed, and that they all boast of their martyrs.

Upon this you expect that I am seriously to set about drawing a comparison between miracles and miracles, prophets and prophets, martyrs and martyrs ; as for your reply, you know it all beforehand.

But be not afraid ; I know very well, that if I was to take this course, we might battle it for an age to come.

The only thing I desire of you, is to tell me plainly, whether you think that the doctrine of the gospel carries any marks of falshood about it *, whether the consequences of it are pernicious, and whether it would be prejudicial to society, that all men should be brought to conform themselves thereto, and adapt its maxims.

I presume before-hand, that you will grant me the very reverse, and agree with me that the gospel tends to the good of mankind, or to say something more, that it tends to make men truly good.

This being allowed, I ask no more. What you acknowledge to be essentially good, will ever continue to be so, abstracting from those miraculous testimonies which you think yourselves obliged to call in question.

In the main, the question is, whether in moral things men have the same capacity of distinguishing good from evil, that they have in natural things. If

* By what is here called the doctrine of the gospel, must not be understood the dogmatical and mysterious part of it, but the evident, moral, and practical part, such as it is described in these letters, particularly in those where mention is made of the evangelical counsels. See from the eighth letter to the twelfth inclusively.

they have, they will be able to judge of what is good, just, and true, without standing in need of the testimony of others, in the same manner as I judge that such a thing is bread, without its being necessary that other people should assure me of it.

This capacity of discernment and choice, with which every man is endowed by the Author of his existence, would be, if it were duly cultivated, the basis of all religion ; and to invite men not to lose the use of it, is the author's aim, from the beginning to the end of this book.

Those who come under the name of unbelievers, will not disown this principle, they will value themselves upon adopting it.

All that we desire of them, is to act suitably to this confession, not to do a violence to this same capacity, or, in other words, not to labour to fly from evidence.

Upon this supposition, we have some reason to imagine that the doctrine of the gospel, when considered in its simplicity, will appear to them altogether worthy of their esteem and reverence.

Some will say that this is not enough ; we must require of them that they should acknowledge its divine institution. Hold, if you please ; it would be acting contrary to our principles, if we should pretend to usurp an authority over the understanding, which owns no other authority but that of truth itself.

But you that are so very rigid, are you not jealous of a word * ? and does not this same jealousy do

* Jealousy is always attended with a stubbornness and an inflexibility, which far from being ever able to succeed in reclaiming the minds of men, only serve to render them the more inflexible in their opposition.

more harm than good ? for those others, whom you want to get the better of, jealous of a liberty upon which they think you encroach, will be much more on their guard; and seek out new reasons to decline giving up the point ; and who knows, if by that means they will not go further off still.

Methinks another course might be taken : without encroaching upon the liberty of other people, one might endeavour to improve to the best advantage, that small share of a good disposition which he finds in them *.

You maintain, (would I say, directing my speech to an unbeliever) that it is impossible to prove the gospel to be writ by divine inspiration ; neither shall I undertake to do it. Let us, if you will, leave the point undecided ; only grant me that it is not easy to prove the contrary. I ask no more at present.

You have already acknowledged that the gospel tends to promote the good of men, as well of every one in particular, as of society in general ; consequently you acknowledge that its establishment is good, and every way advantageous ; this is unanswerable.

I shall ask you one question more ; do you know of any other sort of establishment, of any kind of doctrine which tends more than this to make men honest, and capable of fulfilling the duties of society. You will undoubtedly answer, No.

You are then convinced, that it is the chief interest of mankind to follow the maxims of the gospel. I ask no more.

* A condescension always useful, and which, far from being ever prejudicial, would on the contrary be the means to persuade.

This is a proper place for the following remark, viz. that the best thing we can propose to ourselves, in proving to men the divine institution of the gospel, is to convince them thoroughly, that it is their true interest to follow the maxims of it; for it is observable, that among that infinite number of people who have not the least scruple about the divine institution of the gospel, there are very few whose conduct proves them to be really persuaded of it *.

Now if it is true, that by taking a different course, I do not fail to bring my friend to the point, to that point from which he would ever have kept retiring to a greater distance, in proportion as I had shewed an inclination to make use of force; I ask whether there be any inconveniency in this sort of condescension? whether stiffness and a bigotted resolution not to give up a tittle, nor so much as a single word, would succeed better?

Besides, it frequently happens, that men being left to their liberty, come insensibly to view things in a different light. What appears to them at first only good and useful, may afterwards claim a higher share in their esteem: they may by degrees, come to the source of every thing that is good, just, and

* The maxims of the gospel, leads us every where to consider things according to the true nature and design of them. Jesus Christ describes two men, one of whom arrives at the end, even while he seems to recede from it, and the other goes back from it, while he expresses the greatest eagerness to advance. I ask then (it is Jesus Christ who speaks, Matth. xxi. 31.) "Whether of the twain did the will of the Father?" A most judicious question, and which may be easily applied in the case before us.

true * : and it is very possible, that without strictly accounting to themselves for their way of thinking on that head, they may at bottom be better christians in their sentiments and dispositions than they themselves imagine.

Would there not be room here for this gospel-maxim : " He that is not against us, is for us ? "

* Where else shall we find this source, but in the supreme cause ? some persons are so little acquainted with what is good, or true in itself, that if you ask them upon what grounds they conclude that the doctrine of the gospel is good, just, and true, their answer will be, because it is divine.

I take a different course : from observing that this same doctrine is good, just, and true, I conclude that it is of a divine original.

I meet with persons who dispute the consequence. But I only desire them to grant me the thing itself ; and upon this supposition, I doubt not but that they will sooner or later come to the same conclusion, though in a tacit manner perhaps : for there are some people, who will not entirely renounce certain principles which they have once laid down.

After all, we must attack people with their own principles, without which it is very certain that they only beat the air. If they are capable of owning any thing that is true in itself, we must take hold of that, and set aside every thing else which they do not agree to.

true : and it is very possible, that without finally according to themselves for their way of thinking on that head, they may at bottom be better christians in their sentiments and dispositions than they themselves imagine.

Would there not be room here for this gospel-maxim : " He that is not against us, is for us ? "

" Where else shall we find this saying, but in the gospel ? " I have seen some persons who have acquainted with it, and say, " It is in itself, that I see all them upon whom it is founded, that the doctrine of the gospel is good, just, and true, their conduct will be, because it is divine."

I take a different course : from observing that this doctrine is good, just, and true, I conclude that it is of divine origin.

I read with pleasure the history of the reformation : but I only desire them to grant me the thing itself, and upon this supposition, I doubt not but that they will soon or later come to the same conclusion, though in a different manner. For there are some people, who will not readily renounce certain principles which they have once laid down.

After all, we must attack people with their own principles, without which it is very certain that they only bear the air. If they are capable of owning any thing that is true in itself, we must take hold of that, and let the every thing else which they do not agree to.

L E T T E R S

Concerning the RELIGION essential
to MAN, as it is distinct from that
which is merely an Accession to it.

A LETTER to the AUTHOR of the
Fourteen Letters *.

*The principle of a self-sufficient Being. Conclusions
which the free thinkers draw from thence.*

S I R,

THE introduction prefixed to the book of
the fourteen letters, represents religion
under an amiable idea. We are delight-
ed to see that the end of it is so worthy of God, and
so advantageous to mankind.

However, certain persons have remarked, that
this principle, from whence such fine conclusions are
there deduced, gives free-thinkers a handle to sap
the foundation of religion.

* These fourteen letters, wherein the systems of the
antients and moderns are reconciled, by an exposition of the
different sentiments of some divines, concerning the state of
souls, when separated from their bodies, are published in a
book, intituled, *The World unmask'd: or, The Philosopher the
greatest Cheat.*

From God's being self-sufficient, they conclude that he takes little notice of what passes among men. The infinite distance, say they, which is between the Creator and his creatures, places him so far above them, that he cannot be offended with their disorders ; that satisfied with his own happiness, he cannot envy them the slight satisfactions which they endeavour to procure to themselves in this world ; much less make them suffer for them by rigorous punishments ; that they are the wisest men who make the most of this life, by enjoying those pleasures it affords, without troubling themselves with useless fears about a futurity ; which fears do no more honour the Deity, than the enjoyment of pleasure dishonour him.

These conclusions, as is evident, tend to nothing less than the ruin of morality ; there is something specious in them, and they seem to flow pretty naturally from the principle in question. Nevertheless, we cannot deny that this principle is true ; but care must be taken, say they, not to lay down a principle which furnishes ill disposed persons with a pretence to hurt religion. This appears to me a puzzling objection, and I know not what to answer.

THE ANSWER. LETTER I.

The first Being self-sufficient. The certainty of this principle. Insufficient solutions. Conclusions opposite to those of the free-thinkers. The views of God in what we call religion. An essential relation between what we call duty, and what is the real interest of man.

IF the principle laid down in the piece you mention, necessarily led to the conclusions which some

people deduce from it, I should infer from thence, that it is a false one ; and if I inferred that it is a false principle, I should likewise infer that there is no God.

In effect, if God is not self-sufficient, he is not the perfect Being : if he is not the perfect Being, some other being must possess what he wants. How shall we call that being independent of God ; is it self-existent ? if it is, it must be the first cause, every thing must have proceeded from it. If every thing proceeded from it, it must comprehend all perfection. If it comprehends all perfection, it must be self-sufficient. If it is self-sufficient, this must be the Being we call God *.

We must therefore either admit of this principle, or give into scepticism. But the pretended free-thinkers do themselves admit of it. How can this be reconciled ? we must prove to them that their conclusions are wrong.

Several people have attempted to overthrow their conclusions, by reasonings pretty well known. They have alleged, that “ the Deity, though self-sufficient, “ was pleased to create beings, in order to be glorified by them ; that he prescribed to them laws “ and conditions, to the observance or non-observance of which, he has annexed rewards and punishments. They add, that God having been “ pleased to declare to men, the manner in which he “ would be served by them, he cannot be unconcerned as to their obeying or slighting these declarations ; that he is jealous of his glory ; that his

* It will appear, that the being which had been supposed not to be self-sufficient, must be an inferior being, dependent on the first cause, and cannot be God.

“justice no less engages him to execute his threatenings, than to fulfil his promises.”

These are the common solutions by which they pretend to ward off the blows which free-thinkers aim at religion. But it is obvious that such solutions, far from removing the difficulties, leave them in their full strength. The free-thinkers still ask, what satisfaction the infinite Being can receive from the service he requires of such little worms as men? etc. They imagine, that they have the strongest reasons on their side; let us see what may be alleged against them.

I still lay down the same principle, God is a self-sufficient Being; this is indisputably true. From thence you conclude, that he takes little notice of what passes among men; and the reason, you allege, is that God has no need of them. — But here you begin to contradict yourself *. If God is self-sufficient, he is perfectly disinterested †; if he is perfectly disinterested, he did not make men out of nothing, to increase his own happiness. By creating beings susceptible of happiness, he could have no other end, but to render them happy. If this was his end, which cannot be doubted, this end subsists invariably. God is therefore concerned for the happiness of those beings whom he has created.

The infinite distance between the Creator and his creatures, may you still say, place him so far above them, that he is not offended at their disorders. I

* The contradiction consists in this, that after having supposed him a self-sufficient Being, they suppose that the need alone which he has of men, would engage him to be concerned about them.

† What is infinite, can lose nothing, as it can acquire nothing.

grant it; to speak accurately, the infinite Being cannot be offended; it is the creatures who hurt themselves *, and for this very reason their irregularities displease God †.

The rest of your conclusions being of the same kind with the preceding, are not less easy to be refuted. God, say you, satisfied with his own felicity, cannot envy men the satisfaction they endeavour to procure to themselves in this world. I grant it, and because this principle of envy cannot have place in the self-sufficient Being, I draw from thence quite opposite conclusions. I conclude, that if he forbids men the enjoyment of slight satisfactions, it is only so far as these would hurt them.

I grant further, that to speak accurately, God is not more dishonoured by the pleasures which men procure to themselves, than he is honoured by their fears about a futurity. But you will likewise grant to me, that if there is something real in this futurity ‡, if the future happiness or misery of every man depends upon the use he makes of life, just precautions in that respect cannot be useless; that the same goodness which engages God to interest himself for men, would likewise engage him to warn them of what they are to expect, and of the inevitable consequences of justice and injustice; in this case the same goodness, I say, would invite men to take care of themselves, and to consent to their real happiness.

* This is a principle of great importance, and will be often repeated in the sequel.

† Because those irregularities are inconsistent with their happiness.

‡ Here the thing is put by way of question, because those to whom we address ourselves may doubt of a futurity; we do not here undertake to prove it, we only suppose it.

Cannot we conclude from hence, that since God does nothing for his own advantage, he has no other view but the advantage of his creatures ; that whatever is called religion is reduced to this * ; that every other idea of religion, far from honouring God, really dishonours him ; that at least it supposes him to be like unto men, who in consequence of their insufficiency, cannot be perfectly disinterested. It is therefore evident, that the principle of a self-sufficient Being, far from ruining religion, is the real basis of it ; far from destroying morality, comprehends the strongest motives to it.

To take men on the side of interest, is touching them in the most sensible part ; every other motive must give place to that. Talk to them of duty, justice, or gratitude, they take these to be very fine things, and their understanding approves of them. But when the question is put to them in practice, to sacrifice something to what they have owned to be fine and commendable, they are drawn by an almost invincible inclination to prefer their advantage, or at least what appears to them as such, to the things which justice may require.

This therefore would be the essential point, to make men sensible that what is called justice, duty, etc. no way differs from their real interests ; that there is even an essential relation between one and the other, that it is only on account of this relation, that duty, justice, etc. are required of them ; that the self-

* If what the scripture says is here observed, namely, that " God made all things for his own glory ;" I answer, that it is not from the expressions of scripture we form the idea of God ; that on the contrary, by the idea of God we rectify whatever these expressions seem to ascribe to him that is either imperfect or contradictory.

sufficient Being having no need of his creatures, has in what we call religion, no other interest in view but theirs, no other aim but that of making them happy, which was the sole design of his creating them. Perhaps if we could once convince men of this truth, they would readily assent to every other.

It is amazing to see the strange contradiction there is between what men believe and how they act; from whence it is concluded, that to believe and to act are two very different things. They are not so different as one would think. Men, capricious as they are, act more consistently than we imagine: I add, in what nearly concerns them, and when they are well persuaded of it. This will pass for a paradox, but it will not be impossible to prove it.

OBJECTION.

S I R,

I AM at a loss to comprehend how it is possible to prove the proposition you advance. Men, say you, are more consistent than we imagine; methinks experience contradicts it, and the best-grounded censure that can be passed upon them, is, that they do not act consistently with what they profess to believe.

L E T T E R II.

The foundations of civil society, and the religion essential to man, are the same. The religion essential to man, ought to be within his reach. It exercises the natural faculties. It excludes whatever is false or imaginary. Conclusion.

S I R,

PRAY let us make a distinction between what men profess to believe, and what they do really believe. If they are inconsistent in the first respect, they are hardly so in the second. Experience, far from contradicting this, proves it. We need only trace men in what nearly concerns them, to be convinced of this truth. It will be said, that this censure takes place only in matters of religion; that with respect to the affairs of life, where their interest is in question, they are very consistent: and I affirm, that the reason of it is, because they are persuaded of the affairs of life which concern their interest, and that they are not persuaded of the things which they profess to believe in matters of religion. This will be readily granted, and it may be added, that the cause of it is not very remote; that the affairs of this life affect their senses, whereas the objects of religion do not; that the former have in them an evidence which the latter cannot have.

This is unquestionable, and a remedy for this inconveniency has been long sought for. The event does not shew that the enquiry has been successful; perhaps it will never be so, at least compleatly. However, some measures may possibly be taken to

succeed a little better. It is not impossible, but that the experience of time past, may furnish us with instructions for the time to come, how we may take men by a different byass, or at least offer them old truths in a new light, and give these truths in this respect the grace of novelty.

The objects of religion, say they, have no effect upon us, because they are too far above us : some of them are incomprehensible, others seem contradictory, others require such sentiments and dispositions, as man has not in himself, and which the imagination must supply, by such efforts as cannot be continued.

To remedy this inconveniency, it would be proper to examine whether religion has not a kind of evidence, by which it would be within the reach of men, truths of sentiment *, which may as it were be felt, and may strongly interest them. By shewing religion to them in this light, we might counterbalance the too strong impression which sensible objects make upon them.

I only say counterbalance ; for I do not pretend that the evidence, of which religion is susceptible, is so strongly palpable, as that which arises from the sensation of material things ; but I think it may be supposed that the same wisdom which has endowed the animal part of man with senses or corporeal faculties, that enable him to discern material objects with an entire certainty, must have endowed the

* We do not mean here, certain ambiguous or imaginary sentiments, which will be mentioned afterwards. By these truths of sentiment, we mean truths palpable for their evidence ; and there are such without doubt. From thence proceeded these figurative expressions, This is palpable, one feels it.

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rational part of man with spiritual faculties, which enable him in like manner to discern with some sort of certainty the objects * of these faculties.

The relation between the corporeal senses, and sensible objects, is one of the foundations of civil society, and of the security † of particular men.

From this I infer, that the relation between the faculties and objects of the mind, ought in like manner to be the foundation and basis of that religion which is essential to man. If this relation should not carry with it a certainty proportionable to the nature of the objects, there would be nothing fixed and determinate in religion, nothing wherein men could unanimously agree, as they do in sensible objects ‡. In that case, religion would be no more than a chi-

* We have the more reason to compare the faculties of the mind to those of the body, as we can give no idea of the former, but by a sort of figures taken from material things. With regard to moral things, we speak of feeling, tasting, seeing, perceiving: we express by the same words, what is good or evil, handsome or ugly, strait or crooked.

† Without the certainty that results from this relation, man would continually run the risk of being either mistaken, or imposed upon; he could not chuse what is fit for his preservation, nor avoid what may hurt him. Neither could he enter into any contract with safety: society would be overturned, and the race of man destroyed.

‡ The unanimous consent of men with respect to sensible objects, is the basis of all contracts. They do not call into question, whether a field which they till be a field, or whether the money they receive be money. The religion essential to man, ought in like manner to be founded upon truths that are not equivocal; truths of so simple and evident a nature, that all men must be obliged unanimously to acquiesce in them.

merical object, depending on the fancy or caprice *, not to say the personal interest of men.

I go still further, and say, that if there is no such certainty, not only religion is a mere chimæra, but even society has no solid foundation.

One of the firmest foundations of society, is the natural capacity which men have to distinguish between what is just, and what is unjust, or the unanimous assent which they are obliged to give to the general principles that are the basis of good laws, which assent engages them to submit to them. Now an evidence of that kind does not come under the senses; it is a consequence of the relation we have mentioned. This relation is therefore the basis, not only of that religion which is essential to man, but likewise of civil society. Or to make the question still plainer, let us say that civil society, and the religion essential to man, have in reality the very same basis.

This ought therefore to be the basis of every religion, at least if we speak of religion that is within the reach of man, and can make an impression upon him; if it bears a relation to his natural faculties, and at the same time to his true interests.

The consequence would be, that religion, far from destroying these faculties, would on the contrary serve to exercise them, and by unfolding them gradually, and directing them to the noblest objects, would in proportion improve and exalt them.

This religion, as is evident, could not admit of any contradiction; it would not require man to see what his eyes do not discover to him, much less to

* This is proved by experience, with regard to the different sects of christians.

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supply the defect of evidence by the efforts of his imagination. This religion, being real and true, would exclude every thing that is false or imaginary. Now every effort of the imagination, by which we endeavour to persuade ourselves that we see what we do not really see, or feel what we do not really feel, leads to nothing else but what is false and imaginary *.

From what I have said, I conclude, that if men act consistently in the affairs of life, because they see, touch, and are strongly interested in them; I conclude, I say, that if they could lay hold on that part of religion which is unquestionable, and strongly interests them, they would be little less consistent in matters of religion, than they are in the affairs of life.

L E T T E R III.

The religion essential to man, ought to be founded on sentiment and experience. An example of this truth. The origin of agreeable sentiments. The cause of painful sentiments. Man has an invincible inclination to happiness. An inference to be made from thence. Conclusion. Man introduced into society. The language of thine and mine, true and false. Origin of the idea of justice. The use of what we call human justice.

S I R,

IF sentiment and experience ought not to serve as a basis to the religion essential to man, he might justly complain of the Deity, who in that case must

* The explanation of this may be found in the second part, where we have fully shewn, that such efforts are vain and fruitless.

have put him in a much worse condition with regard to spiritual things, than with regard to material ; since in the former, man could have no certainty, whilst he had an entire certainty with respect to the latter : that is, the noblest part of his being would be reduced to float in uncertainty, and to feed upon empty speculations, without ever arriving at what is unquestionably true, which can only be the effect of experience.

It is so true, that without experience nothing would be certain, that we are obliged to begin with what is most plain and palpable, when we attempt to bring men to the truth, by inviting them to consult their own ideas.

The first idea man has, is, that he exists †. This idea is entirely grounded on sentiment, and it is only by that sentiment he has the idea of being. This experience leads him to a reflection, which is this ; he feels that he could not be the author of his own existence, and cannot give being to what does not exist. This makes him conclude, that the source of existence resides elsewhere.

Where must it reside ? in some Being that has not received its existence from any other : for if it had, it would not be the source of existence. Man is therefore obliged to own that there is a first Being.

This first discovery (which, as you see, is only an unavoidable consequence of experience) is sufficient to lead him to others, I mean to more particular ideas concerning the attributes of that first Being. The following ideas offer themselves very naturally, and as it were of themselves.

† It is rather a sentiment than an idea.

Whatever we are capable of feeling, tasting, or knowing, must necessarily proceed from the first cause. We know it must be the cause not only of objects, but likewise of the capacity we have to enjoy them. This idea leads us to discover in the first Being, not only power, but also wisdom and goodness ; and this discovery likewise arises from experience.

Nothing is more familiar to experience, than the sentiment of joy. This sentiment, which is only momentary in man, gives him some idea of a more real felicity, whereof that which he feels is only a specimen or sample. From this experience he concludes, that the Author of his being, having made him capable of so delicious a sentiment, must be the source of all felicity. But, say they, if man must seek in the Author of his being, the cause of all the sentiments he feels, he will be obliged to ascribe likewise to the same cause, all the painful sentiments of which he is susceptible. Grief is one of them, and is not less familiar to experience than joy.

I answer, that this very experience leads him to a new discovery. He observes, that he is grieved, either because he has not what he desires, or because he cannot get rid of what hurts him : he knows that neither of these things can happen to the supreme cause, who if he could desire any thing, would create it in an instant ; and could easily rid himself of whatever was offensive to him. Man concludes from this, that neither grief, nor any other painful sentiment can affect the supreme Being ; that such sentiments proceed from the weakness and dependency of created beings. Here he begins to see more distinctly than before, what an infinite distance there is between the Creator and his creatures.

Another thing which he feels, leads him still farther; I mean the invincible inclination † he has to happiness. This sentiment, which denotes a kind of want, makes him observe that there is a kind of distance between that end which he aspires, and the state in which he really is. He is sensible, that this inclination or desire, which is inseparable from his being, cannot but be ascribed to the Author of it: from thence he concludes, that happiness is the end of his being.

This conclusion leads him to another. He observes that neither he nor other men, who have all the same desire, do arrive at happiness; at least not in the short time they live in this world; that if it was possible they should never arrive at it, the first cause must have failed in his design; that this invincible desire of happiness would only serve to torment them, and to render them more miserable.

From thence he concludes, that their life in this world is only the beginning of their existence or duration; that there must be hereafter a sort of existence which we know not, and resources which will bring them at last to the end for which they were designed.

Another remark which confirms him in the notion of a futurity is, that when he compares the duration of inanimate beings with that of the life of man, he cannot suppose that the being for whom they were made ‡ is inferior to them in duration.

† Every inclination or desire supposes that we have not attained what we aim at.

‡ It will perhaps be questioned, whether inanimate beings are made for man. But though we should grant that the most considerable of them, as the stars, are made for other

This little sketch may sufficiently shew how sentiment and experience, even when they begin with corporeal things, might lead us gradually to the most essential knowlege.

The man whom we have introduced here, is arrived without the help of any other guide†, not only at the knowlege of the deity, and of his essential attributes, but likewise at that of a future state. His attention, however, has as yet been confined to himself. Let us now introduce him into civil society. Perhaps by observing what passes there, he may be led to sentiments of another kind, which will give him new, or more distinct ideas of a future state.

This man being placed in the midst of society, begins to consider attentively those who compose it: he immediately observes that the earth produces all the necessary things for their subsistence. This earth being divided into unequal portions, occasions a language among them which is new to him; namely, that of mine and thine. This language occasions another; namely, that of just and unjust, true and false.

He examines more closely this kind of language. He hears men say one to another, This is false, that is unjust. Upon enquiring into the meaning of these terms, he finds, that what they understand by the word false, consists either in denying what they

ends, it will not be denied that trees, for instance, are made for men. And yet how greatly does their duration exceed that of his life!

† We do not mean to suppose here, that every man is capable of arriving at the knowlege of these truths, without any foreign assistance. We mean only, that he may attain such a knowlege by the help of sentiment, and by consulting his own ideas.

know to be true, or in affirming what they know not to be so † ; that what they call unjust, consists either in taking from another man what is allowed to be his, or in not keeping one's promise.

He observes, that the same men, who agree so little with respect to what they call falshood and injustice in certain cases, are perfectly agreed, in the general idea of justice and truth, as well as in the esteem they have for them.

He begins to infer from thence, that the ideas of justice and truth have something fixed and steady in their nature ; he enquires after the origin of them, and can only find it in the first cause. He is sensible that nothing which proceeds from the invention of men can be fixed and steady, since they can change and destroy it. Now men cannot change their ideas of justice and truth : from whence he concludes, that these ideas are produced by a natural cause.

He examines man with respect to what is just : he sees tribunals set up for dispensing what they call justice. This justice is divided into civil and criminal. By the latter, those who have done any prejudice to others, either undergo certain punishments, or are condemned to lose their lives. By the former, men are obliged to render to others what belongs to them. These appear to him to be good establishments.

Upon examining things more closely, several inconveniences arise to him ; falshood ‡ lends assistance

† This is the most palpable kind of falshood ; it is what all men hate when they see it in others, and what they cannot bear to be discovered in themselves.

‡ Without the assistance men receive from falshood, injustice could not be supported.

to injustice ; from thence it happens that the ablest judges are often at a loss to discern who is in the right, and who in the wrong ; they are forced, for want of what they call proofs, sometimes to give wrong decisions, and to condemn the innocent. Our man sees such things happen, and observes, that notwithstanding such establishments *, justice is not administered ; that one man peaceably enjoys the spoils of another, who is undone by it ; that another, being guilty of murder, has found means to fix the crime on an innocent person, and that the latter has suffered the punishment which was due to the former. Our man, I say, seeing that the evil cannot be remedied, is astonished and perplexed to the greatest degree. He asks himself, whether it is possible, that the falsehood, to which that injustice was owing, will never be brought to light ; that the innocent person, who was condemned, will never have any amends made to him ; that the usurper and the murderer will for ever escape all punishment ?

He concludes, that if it is so, not only the justice which is administered in these tribunals is unjust, but that even the Author of nature is so. He goes still farther. He does not here perceive that goodness and wisdom, which he thought he had discovered in the first cause ; and he is tempted to deny, that it has any of these attributes, which he had judged inseparable from it.

He asks however, what can be the origin of his ideas : how he could discern what is contrary to

* For all this, these establishments are good and absolutely necessary ; it only shews that they are insufficient, and cannot thoroughly cure the complicated evils which falsehood and injustice produce.

goodness, wisdom and equity ; whether these things have a real existence ? he cannot suppose them in any created being *. He is therefore obliged to go back to the first cause, as to the source and origin of his ideas.

Our man being still more perplexed, would find himself in the same case with one who should run round in a circle ; after fatiguing himself to no purpose, he would still find himself in the same place.

He suspects, that with regard to this difficulty, there may be some solution which he knows not : he begins to recollect his first ideas of the deity, and they appear to him still more certain. By going through the same steps, which he had made before, he is insensibly led to the solution he wants ; and this solution he finds in a discovery which he had made before.

When he considered men, and their invincible inclination to happiness, he had observed, that in this world they do not attain that end, and had concluded from thence, that they must attain it elsewhere. This conclusion alone will rid him of the difficulty, and the experience he has acquired by studying men, will lead him to more circumstantial conclusions.

He comes to know, that if a Being, equitable in the highest degree, suffers for a time, that justice should not be rightly administered, it is because he reserves to himself the care of distributing it hereafter, in the most exact proportion ; that if he permits, that falsehood should be blended with truth, whilst it

* This created being must have received them from some other, and we must go back for the origin of them, to some Being that could not receive them.

is not in the power of man to distinguish one from the other *, it is because he reserves for another time the entire manifestation of them; that by this manifestation, the usurper and the murderer will receive the retribution due to their violence, and the poor and the innocent men, who sunk under the weight of injustice, will receive a proportionable recompence.

This discovery fills him with a new admiration for the Author of his being: the confusion and perplexity, from which he is just extricated, makes him more sensible of the charms of truth, which displays itself to him.

There is certainly nothing more in the power of man, than to give attention to what passes round him; nothing to which his mind is better disposed, than to consider the consequences of what he sees, and he cannot help observing them. He is shocked at falshood and injustice on all occasions, except when he himself is guilty of them; nay, in that very case, he cannot avoid feeling an inward remorse which condemns him, and he foresees the inevitable consequences of them, both with respect to himself, and others.

A very natural reflection offers itself here, viz. That religion is not so far above the reach of man, as one might imagine; for it does not consist so much in a knowlege, acquired by the instruction we receive from others, as in that which we attain by sentiment and experience.

* The falshood meant here, consists chiefly in errors of fact. How many people have not been known for what they were, till after their death? some for having imposed upon mankind by specious appearances, others for having been unjustly calumniated.

In effect, experience is the basis of all solid knowledge, and evidence is but a consequence of experience. The mathematicians arrive at evidence in the most remote things, merely by the experiments they make upon those which are nearest at hand.

After all, nothing is more conformable to nature, than to begin with what is most simple, palpable, and unquestionable, before we attempt to penetrate into what is far beyond our reach, which in that respect is less evident. Nay, it would be a very rational and wise rule, not to pass a judgment equally positive upon all matters; but exactly to proportion it to the nature of the subjects, and to the degree of certainty they admit of. I am greatly mistaken, if the strict observance of this rule would not infallibly guide us to the religion essential to man.

A LETTER to the Author.

S I R,

UPON reading your letter, I made this remark, that the man whom you bring upon the stage, could form no idea of justice, till he was placed in the midst of society. He had already attained the knowledge of a first Being, by consulting himself, and had ascribed to him power, goodness and wisdom. Nay, he had come to suppose, that the duration of man must extend beyond the term of human life; and he supposed at the same time, that this futurity was only designed for making him perfectly happy.

But when he considers men more closely, when he beholds their injustices, he forms other ideas of that futurity; he is obliged to suppose, that there are pu-

nishments in it ; because he cannot persuade himself, that unjust men escape unpunished *.

All men are in their own minds convinced, or, if you will, persuaded of this truth ; to this they confine the idea they have of justice, which they know more by its effects, than by itself.

It would however greatly concern us to know justice in its origin ; we would perhaps find there the solution of a difficulty, which arises here very naturally.

It is said, that truth, goodness, and even justice require, that God should distribute the rewards he has promised ; and that he cannot dispense with doing it. But it is asked, whether he could not forbear to punish, whether it is not in his power to shew mercy, and pardon the guilty ?

To this it is answered, That God is obliged by his justice to execute his threatenings, as well as to fulfil his promises. But is it not evident, that this answer is not satisfactory, and that it is begging the question ? for it is allowed to be just, that crimes should be punished. But if God cannot dispense with inflicting punishments, we ask the reason of this necessity ?

I believe, Sir, you will agree with me, that no satisfactory answer has yet been made to this question ?

* The idea of a painful futurity would not offer itself naturally to the mind of man. Being formed and designed for happiness, he would only have before him an agreeable prospect. The idea of pain offers itself to him only as a consequence of falshood and injustice, and then the former becomes unavoidable : for he cannot doubt, but that what is wrong leads to evil, that is, to pain.

LETTER IV.

The nature of justice. The idea of order. Well-being is a consequence of order. Pain is a consequence of disorder. The use of the connection between pain and disorder. Conclusion. The end and use of punishments that are inflicted. An imperfect comparison.

S I R,

I Think your remark is very just. Nothing is better known than justice in its most glaring effects, and nothing is less understood than justice considered in itself.

It may be said, that it is not necessary for man to know the nature thereof, and that it is sufficient for him not to mistake its effects. This would certainly be sufficient, was it not probable, that his being ignorant of the cause, may at last occasion his mistaking the effects of it : this appears from the difficulty you propose, which I need not repeat.

Justice may be considered in various respects. We have elsewhere observed *, that justice is no more than perfect equity, and that equity signifies equality or proportion †. This way of considering it is the

* In the sequel of the fourteen letters.

† This equality does not imply, that all men should undergo the same fate ; but that they should be judged with all due proportion, by the same invariable rules ; that God, whose knowledge is perfect, should proportion rewards and punishments with the utmost exactness, and without the least partiality. Herein consists the equality, which is denoted by the word equity.

easiest, and the nearest; at the same time, it is founded upon truth; and if men always considered it in this light, they would not conceive a false notion of it.

Let us endeavour to trace the thing a little higher, and consider, what justice is, essentially, or what can be the cause of it*. Let us first observe, that it is an essential property of a wise Being to do nothing in vain. From thence we may conclude, that the Author of nature must have designed the different faculties, with which he has endowed man, for different uses, which concur in perfecting the whole†: we may likewise conclude, that when these faculties are applied to other uses, order is thereby overturned, and still more so, when they are the noblest faculties of the mind which are misapplied.

A comparison will not be improper here. The human body is so framed, that all the parts of it have their several uses; their order, and the subserviency of them to each other, bears a relation to these uses. This order is essential, not only to the beauty, but likewise to the well-being of the body; and as soon as this order suffers any change, that well-being ceases; there arises a painful sentiment, which is a certain sign that some of the parts are disordered.

From hence it is easy to conclude, that pain is only a consequence of disorder. Methinks, it might likewise be concluded, that disorder cannot be introduced into the faculties of the mind, without raising in it a painful sentiment.

* Though we have already examined what justice is essentially in the introduction to the fourteen letters, yet the reader will find the same subject treated of herein a different manner, and better explained.

† This harmony is what constitutes order.

Upon taking a nearer view of this matter, we shall find, that if it was otherwise, all nature would be destroyed.

Let us suppose that well-being is not the consequence of order, and that pain does not proceed from disorder; how should we know when the disorder begins, or be induced to employ the means of preventing the progress of it †?

Nay further, without the connection that subsists between pain and disorder, men could not discern the difference between order and disorder, nothing would induce him to prefer one to the other.

If it is objected, that the beauty of one, and the deformity of the other, would be sufficient to determine his choice; I answer, that the first, the invincible desire which appears in man, is after well-being ‡; that without the relish he has for what is good, he could have none for what is beautiful.

In effect, the first perception which man has of what is beautiful, and what is deformed, is only the agreeable or disagreeable impression which things make upon him, and the preference he gives to what is beautiful, is only the effect of that impression.

From hence I conclude, that man does not perceive the cessation of order, but in proportion as he feels the cessation of well-being.

† Nothing is more obvious than this, with regard to the human body. If man was not warned by the pain he feels, that some parts of his body are disordered, he would grow worse and worse, without perceiving it. And if the sentiment of pain was not insupportable to him, he could never be brought to use the means necessary for his recovery.

‡ Well-being is the first thing which man knows to be essentially good for him.

Let us return to the idea of justice; and remove the idea of rigour which is annexed to it. If we suppose, that order only prevails among the creatures; this rigour would not take place.

In this case, justice would be essentially nothing but order itself, and that exact * proportion which constitutes the harmony of order, as it does the perfection and happiness of intelligent creatures.

Or if you would consider the matter otherwise, justice in God will be the approbation he gives to that order, and the delight he takes in the happiness and perfection of the beings whom he has created.

Let us now suppose, that disorder prevails among the creatures, what will follow from that which we have laid down concerning the nature of justice? order and harmony ceasing, pain and confusion will be the consequences, the natural and inevitable consequences of it.

And if we go back still farther, and consider what justice may be in God, we shall find that it is invariably the same, as we have supposed it; the same, I say, in its principle.

This principle is the good-will which God bears to the creatures, the approbation he gives to order, which constitutes their perfection and happiness. This approbation, and this good-will always subsist †; from whence it follows, that God cannot approve of disorder, which renders the same creatures miserable. In that case, justice in God will be a constant will to

* Justice takes place only in restoring an exact proportion.

† As God necessarily approves of order, which renders men happy; so he necessarily disapproves of disorder, which renders them miserable.

bring back his creatures to happiness, and that by restoring them to order, which is inseparable from it.

This is essentially rigorous justice, or what appears to us as such by its effects, though in its principle, it is only goodness, directed by wisdom.

Here we behold the unity of the divine attributes, all which seem to center in goodness. From whence we may conclude, that the supreme Being is invariably the same ; that the principle, by which he consents to the pains his creatures endure, is in no respect different from that by which he renders them happy *.

A question offers itself very naturally in this place, viz. what must be the immediate cause of pain ; whether it is inflicted by the Deity himself, or is merely the natural effect of disorder ?

I answer, that disorder is essentially the cause of pain, and would alone suffice to render men completely miserable. However it is possible, that the means which divine wisdom employs to redress the disorder that is introduced among men, may occasion a more violent degree of pain.

This may be illustrated by a comparison. Every disorder that disturbs the oeconomy of the human body, is accompanied with pain ; and is alone sufficient to make a man suffer ; but the means employed for removing this disorder, are generally a great addition to his sufferings. The distemper is only cured by things of a contrary nature, which attack the cause of it. The combat becomes more and more violent, in proportion as the cause is more inveterate.

* This has already been observed elsewhere. See the introduction to the book of the fourteen letters.

It would be superfluous to carry the comparison further, and still more so, to make the application of it to this subject : the thing speaks of itself.

If we now come to view the difficulty in question, we shall find it entirely removed. It is asked, whether God could not dispense with inflicting punishment ? we have shewn that pain is an unavoidable consequence of disorder, and is not a punishment inflicted. But grant that there are likewise inflicted punishments, we have shewn that these punishments tend only to restore man to happiness, by re-instating him in order.

If this is not satisfactory, I ask in my turn, whether God can desist from the constant will he has to bring back men to their first end, and to restore all his works to their original state, when “ he saw that “ they were good ?”

In this case I would say, that God may desist from being good, since he can disown the wisdom of his works ; or rather, I would say, that God can contradict himself ; for if he saw, that the works of his wisdom were very good in their original state, he would disown the approbation he had given to them, if he did not restore them to it *.

Here we see all those ideas of justice, which men have formed to themselves, vanish away : ideas which they have built upon false principles, or groundless suppositions.

* It will be asked, whether God could not restore men to their primitive integrity, without inflicting on them any punishment. As for what the supreme Being can do, I have nothing to say. People may flatter themselves, if they please, that God will restore them to their primitive state, without punishing them ; but they have no certainty, that such a conduct would be consistent with perfect wisdom and equity.

They have represented the Deity as a prince, who being personally offended by a great number of his subjects, has a right to punish them all, with great rigour. This prince, though justly provoked, may, if he pleases, depart from his rights * : he may be led by his clemency to have mercy on the guilty, or to shew favour to whom he pleases, whilst the rest, who are treated according to justice †, cannot complain of this distinction.

This comparison which they have made between a weak, limited man, and the self-sufficient Being, has occasioned their mistake. The former may be hurt, and personally offended by men-like himself : the offence concerns him, and in that respect he may be

* This way of speaking of God is very false. The right which princes have to punish, is advantageous to them, and maintains their authority : accordingly when they depart from it, they shew clemency. Was it true, that God punishes, even in the sense which is here imagined, what advantage would he have by such a right ?

† This conduct, which in some respects seems not to be unjust in a prince, is very remote from the equity of the supreme Being. If we inquire into the cause of it, we shall find, that it lies in the weakness, as well as in the policy of the prince. His interest requires, that he should not deprive his dominions of too many subjects ; and further, that he should not give occasion to new insurrections, by letting the crime pass unpunished. He is therefore obliged to pardon some, and to punish others. Whatever partiality may be in this, his interest makes it excusable. Where can we find in the supreme Being any such motives to partiality ? it cannot be the need he has of men, that will induce him to shew favours ; much less can his own safety oblige him to punish them. If neither of these two motives take place, he can only be guided by justice. If he is only guided by justice, nothing can induce him to prefer one man to another.

guided by clemency, and dispense with punishing them. But if it is once owned, that the self-sufficient Being cannot be offended, to speak accurately, by the injustice of men ; if it is true, that this injustice only hurts themselves ; that pain which they call punishment, is an unavoidable consequence of it ; the comparison and the conclusions, which have been drawn from it, fall both to the ground. Such a low and narrow idea of the supreme Being, could only lead to false consequences : and these have a greater influence than is imagined upon the sentiments and practice of men : such an idea of justice leads them to conclude tacitely, that they may dispense with being just. For if justice is an arbitrary thing : if God can depart from it, by shewing favour to whom he pleases, every one may flatter himself, that he will be of that number. And if for this purpose, God needs only consult his clemency, a clemency which is unlimited, to what man could he refuse that which depends only on his will ? from hence it clearly appears, that our being ignorant of the cause, leads us into mistakes about the effects of it.

A LETTER to the Author.

S I R,

IT will be allowed, without any difficulty, that religion, such as you describe it, is pure and evident, and bears a relation to our natural faculties ; but it will not be so easily allowed, that it is sufficient for salvation. People will say, that it is no more than the religion of nature, which is infinitely inferior to revealed religion ; that the latter is not grounded like the former, on sentiment and experience, but on faith, since the christian is obliged to believe what he does not see.

LETTER V.

Of the religion of nature. An equivocal proposition.

A parallel proposition. Revealed religion is only for a time. The religion of nature shall never be suppressed.

S I R,

THE difficulty which you propose, grounded on the difference between natural and revealed religion, is easy to be solved in my opinion: it would at least be so to people, who are not imposed upon by prejudice, and an attachment to words. As for others, it is a hard matter to speak to them, they are frightened before they hear what we have to say: no sooner do certain words, against which they are prepossessed, strike their ear, but they are immediately shocked.

It is very possible however, that the credit of words may come to sink at last; the genius of our time seems disposed to let it fall, and this disposition ought to be encouraged, to the end that reasons may be substituted in their room: and who knows, but that such as have hitherto seemed to have a different taste, may become capable of preferring reality to mere sound? this would happen, could they once comprehend, that an attention to things can neither dazzle nor mislead us; whereas an attachment to words, and a veneration for them, seldom or never fail to do both: experience proves it.

What debates has not this attachment produced! without speaking of wars, properly so called, what wars among divines, what paper engagements! en-

gagements more bloody in their kind, and attended with more hatred and rancour, than such as have been fought between the most irreconcilable princes. This might carry me too far ; stories of this nature would fill up volumes, let us come to the difficulty in question.

“ Natural religion,” say they, “ is greatly inferior or to revealed religion.” I take this to be a lame proposition, and I doubt whether they themselves well understand it.

Here is one equivalent to it, “ Nature in children “ is greatly inferior to education :” it would be easy to prove that the parallel is just.

The use of education is most certainly not to destroy nature, but to bring it to perfection. A right education is employed in cultivating the stock of nature, and in unfolding and bringing forth those ideas and sentiments, which are there shut up ; upon this foundation it always builds. Revealed religion ought to be with respect to men, what education is with respect to children ; it can only build upon the foundation of nature.

This being supposed, revealed religion bears a relation to our natural faculties ; it tends to ennoble and exercise them * ; and ought neither to destroy them, nor to be substituted in their room †. This idea of substitution, which we adopt without being aware of it, would appear ridiculous in any other case ; as may be proved by an example taken from education.

* We repeat here what we advanced in letter second.

† Several people will say, that this is fighting with a man's own shadow, and that the thing is too evident to be disputed. But if they consider the matter attentively, they will find, that they themselves upon occasion attack the truth. See upon that head letter nineteen,

A school-boy has a good natural genius for arithmetic, and desires to learn the rules of it. A master gives him a book of sums, all done to his hand; the scholar would not have the trouble of calculating; he has no more to do, but to believe without examining, the exactness of every one of these rules, being pretty sure that the master who made them is not mistaken. I say, this book would in that case be substituted in the room of the natural capacity, which the boy has for cyphering. He will not exert it, as finding his work ready done.

I am very willing to suppose that these calculations are perfect; what the better is the school-boy for that; will he have the least notion of them? all that he will know is this, that he must believe, without knowing why, that such and such figures put together make such a sum.

You tell me, that I must believe without examining, because God hath said it. But this examination, which you exclude here, necessarily supposes another, or perhaps several, before I can be convinced of this. For from my knowing that there is a God, it does not follow, that it is he who speaks in such a book. That book, say you, carries with it the marks of truth, for which it ought to be received. Very well. You no longer insist then that I should believe without examining, since you yourself invite me to judge of this book by the marks it carries with it.

But how shall I judge of them? by what rule shall I be enabled to discern what you call the marks of truth? in order to this, I must consult the principles of truth, and upon them form my notion of these marks.

Hence it appears very clearly, that revealed religion derives all its proofs from the religion of nature; that the latter is the soul and principle of the former, which is no more than the means employed to discover, and bring to light the religion of nature, which lay as it were buried in man *. This is the first religion that was given to mankind; Abel, Noah, Enoch had no other †. What is called revealed religion came afterwards, and was only designed as a means to check those men, who deviated from the religion of nature.

People are undoubtedly, guided by a false notion, when they consider revealed religion, and the religion of nature as opposite to one another, or when they pretend to extol the former, to the prejudice of the latter. To decide the matter, a person needs only ask himself, whether the means can be opposite to the end, and whether we can warrantably extol the means above the end to which they are only subservient?

What here distinguishes the means from the end, is, that the former are only for a time, whereas the latter must be perpetual. The religion of nature,

* It must be allowed, that this term, Natural Religion, has been turned to a wrong use by several people, who have taken occasion from it to reject all divine revelation. Many retain the name, who mistake and destroy the true principle of it. But it is not such a religion as their's, that we have here in view, as the sequel will plainly shew.

† If it should be objected, that God revealed himself to them sometimes, I allow it: but the religion of nature rightly understood, does not exclude the possibility of a divine revelation. The question is here about a written revelation, which these just men had not.

which was first given, will likewise be the last that remains : all men receive the principles of it at the same time with their being, from which it is inseparable ; their minds retain it after quitting the body *. This, methinks, is sufficient to take away the ambiguity, or false notion, which this term, Natural Religion, might occasion.

It is a tiresome thing to trace men through their endless contradictions ; we are forced to make a great many needless steps ; for the most part they do not know themselves where they would go, and it looks as if the sole design of all their motions was to fly from evidence, when it makes too lively an impression upon them. But one might still give a better description of them ; they want to return to the place from whence they set out † : this is generally the end of all the journies which they pretend to undertake, and wherein they invite you to bear them company : for my part, I should advise them not to stir from their place.

* If we suppose, that the soul exists after the dissolution of the body, there is all the reason in the world for presuming, that the use of the natural faculties will not be suppressed.

† We speak here of persons who seem to be at some pains in their enquiries after truth, but who at bottom are fully determined to stick fast to their old opinions.

LETTER VI.

Of revealed religion. Two ways of examination.

The first way.

S I R,

YOU desire that the man who has already appeared upon the stage, should return again. According to you, it is full time to lead him to the point of revealed religion ; or, in other words, to put into his hands the book which contains written revelation.

You observe that two different methods might be taken. One of them is to prove to him, that this book is of a divine original, by going back to those who were the organs of it, and for this purpose to employ proofs taken from the miracles which they wrought, and from the truth of their predictions, with other proofs of the same nature. The other is barely to suppose that this book may be of a divine original, and to invite him to judge of it by the marks which it bears.

Both of these ways might be employed. The first, I allow, is the more useful ; but then you must own that it is likewise subject to a greater number of inconveniencies, and that it gives rise to more difficulties than it can solve. In effect, the man we speak of would be involved in endless discussions, which after all would never terminate in a compleat evidence. In going back from one generation to another, in order to come at those men to whom God dictated this book, it would be necessary for him to be thoroughly well assured that none of them was either capable

of deceiving or being himself deceived. If it should be said, that these inspired persons have proved the divine original of their writings by miracles, the man in question will not find it a much less difficult matter to be assured of the truth of these miracles * : He will not admit their own testimony in the case ; for if he can only conclude from the proof of miracles, that these writers were divinely inspired, he must seek elsewhere for reasons to convince him that these miracles were real. He can only have the testimony of men, who having seen them, did afterwards declare so to others ; a testimony which must have passed through many mouths before it reaches him.

How many other difficulties present themselves here ! find what solutions we will, there still remain some troublesome doubts which it will be a hard matter to get rid of. But in short, let us suppose that all these difficulties are removed, and that our man is convinced of the divine inspiration of this book, by incontestable proofs, he will not even then be quite free from perplexity. He meets with translators who differ from one another as to the sense of the original ; they make it depend upon several foreign circumstances †, about which they cannot agree.

* He must be assured, that the men who were eye-witnesses of these miracles, were incapable of being deceived either through too much incredulity, or too great an inclination for the marvellous, or by taking effects purely natural for miracles. He must examine the nature of every one of these miracles, in all its circumstances. What a prodigious discussion, and what a tedious length of time are necessary to unravel the truth of facts !

† Such as the alterations which custom introduces into a language, the different style of different nations, and the hyperbolical figures which the eastern people made use of.

And even if we should suppose that all the translators were entirely of one mind, a new labyrinth discovers itself, viz. the prodigious multitude of interpreters all opposite to one another *.

Here is more than enough to shew the numberless inconveniencies that attend this way, and to make us conclude that it would be necessary to chuse another.

LETTER VII.

The second way. The possibility of divine revelation. The foundation of that possibility. The usefulness of divine revelation. Remarks upon the sacred history. The certainty of the historical part, as to fundamental points. The examination of things that are clear.

S I R,

WE have said, that it would be necessary to content ourselves with supposing that this book was of a divine original, and to invite our man to judge of it by the marks which it bears.

The first supposition to be made, and which it would be necessary that this man should agree to, is the possibility of a divine revelation. Good sense dictates to us, that we ought to be assured of the possibility of a thing, before we attempt to be assured of its real existence. By this possibility we understand not so much a physical as a moral possibility, which

* This contrariety, which prevails among interpreters, is what occasions such a multitude of sects, and such a prodigious number of controversies. It likewise gives the Scriptures a handle to ridicule written revelation.

consists in this, that the thing implies no contradiction, and is neither repugnant to good sense, nor to our notion of the supreme Being.

The possibility of a divine revelation is a thing of this nature ; as the man in question will readily allow. He will not think it strange that the Deity should interest himself for men, who are the work of his own hands, and that for the same reason he should employ different means to form and perfect them, like a father who takes pains to form and perfect his children ; that having placed us amidst such an infinite number of different objects, he should condescend to warn and instruct us as to the use we are to make of them ; and that considering the shortness of life, he should also warn us of what is to be our future portion, according to the use we shall make of our time here. Our man will not only allow the possibility of the thing, he will likewise think that we ought to wish it were real. He will perceive, that if our understanding needs any assistance in order to exert itself, any instruction from abroad, none could be of so much service to us, as that which should come from the Author of our being.

Thus you see, that not only the possibility, but also the usefulness of the thing is acknowledged. The question after that would be to prove to our man, that we really have a written revelation. This would be the hardest point of all ; I even think that we should not undertake to prove it to him positively, but be satisfied at first with obtaining his assent to the most evident things.

Let us make some distinction between the things which written revelation contains.

1. The historical part, or relations of facts.

2. Clear and undoubted truths, to which common sense bears witness.

3. Things entirely obscure, and which even appear contradictory : this is what we call mysteries.

If we begin with the historical part, we may require of our man, that he would at least consider it as he would do any other history. It is not necessary that a history should be writ by divine inspiration, in order to convince a man of the truth of it. The same reasons which oblige us to believe an infinite number of facts very remote from our time, should make us receive for truth, those which the sacred historians relate to us, even if we should consider them as no more than common historians.

No body doubts whether there ever was such a man as Cæsar, or Alexander, or Plato, etc. The certainty we have for it, is grounded upon this, that it is morally impossible that thousands of men, in different ages, should have agreed among themselves to impose upon posterity, especially where they had no interest to do so. It is true, that the particular circumstances of such histories are not quite so certain. Accordingly we see that historians vary much in this respect, whilst they never vary as to the fundamental points ; a fresh proof that the fundamental points of history are certain.

The man in question cannot therefore doubt, but that the sacred history is true as to fundamental points ; his doubts will only extend to particular circumstances. Let us be satisfied with requiring of him, that he should not conclude these to be quite false, and only desire him to suspend his judgment.

But it will be said, that if we reduce what we call the fundamental points of history to too small a compass, there will remain nothing of which we can be certain

except this, that there lived men in such an age, and such a part of the world, who were called, one Cæsar, another Alexander, another Nero, etc. I answer, that if what concerns the existence of such men, their country, their name, and the age in which they lived, may be justly called the fundamental points of history, there are other circumstances essential to it which are almost equally certain; such as their particular way of life, and their distinguishing character.

It is not doubted but that Plato was a philosopher, Nero an emperor, and a wicked man; Alexander an ambitious man, and a conqueror. Historians do not vary in such circumstances as these. They may be considered as making a part of the fundamental points of history, and it is almost equally impossible for us to doubt of them. For the same reason, the man in question will not doubt but there was such a man as Moses, that this Moses was a lawgiver, whose laws are still observed by those men whom we call Jews. He will not doubt but that there was a Jesus of Nazareth, from whom the christian religion derives its original, and that this Jesus was crucified by those of his own nation, who, at least a good part of them, did, though too late, acknowledge him for a great prophet, and for the Son of God himself. Such circumstances as these, are inseparable from the fundamental points of history, and are very near quite as certain. Every thing that comes under the name of sacred history, relates to one or the other of these two lawgivers, as it does to the followers of their doctrine.

I invite our man to read it. He finds there facts which he allows to be possible, but he is shocked at a

vast number of things which seem to him childish *, absurd, contrary to common sense, and even manifestly unjust †. It is in vain for him to strive to consider them in a more advantageous light, they always appear to him the same.

What is to be done with such a man? have I any right to insist upon his seeing ‡ what he cannot see? nothing could be more unjust. Shall I desire him to supply this deficiency by the help of his imagination? nothing could be more unfair. Shall I tell him that I see things in a quite different light, and that what appears black to him, seems white to me? shall I add proofs after proofs §? he will answer me, that all he can conclude from it, is, that the objects appear such to me. In effect, it is not in his power to conclude any thing else, and I should act a very unjust part if I require it. All that I can reasonably desire of him, is to suspend his judgment as to things which he does not know, and this he cannot refuse me.

Let us leave for some time the things that are obscure, and come to those which are evident; perhaps the latter will give light to the former.

In this rank I place the testimony which the scripture bears to the attributes of God, and all the rules of justice which it proposes. Moses himself, who

* Such as the surprizing yoke of ceremonies, which seems quite foreign to the nature of man.

† The orders given by Moses and Joshua to massacre whole nations.

‡ This relate to what has been said above; namely, that the religion essential to man, excludes every thing that is false and imaginary.

§ A method pretty much used by several, when they have a mind to convince people.

is incomprehensible in other respects, lays down very many rules of this kind *, which one cannot help admiring, as well for the great exactness and proportion that is to be found in them, as for the benefit which would accrue to mankind, if they would strictly observe them. All these particular rules center in the accomplishment of this immutable law, "Do to others, as you would that they should do to you;" the justice of which every man acknowledges, even while he acts contrary to it.

If we pass from Moses to Jesus Christ, we shall find that these two lawgivers, who differ so much from one another with respect to certain forms, agree perfectly in this point, and that this point constitutes the essential part of the religion of Jesus Christ. He himself positively declares so; and if he had not, one might easily infer it from most of his precepts.

But it will be said, if the whole doctrine of Christ centered there, what would become of so many other precepts †, which seem to be of a very different nature: besides, in that case, what would he have taught men that they did not know before? I answer, that Jesus Christ has, properly speaking, required nothing of men but what they themselves could perceive to be just. He appealed on all occasions to

* Those, who are well versed in the writings of Moses, know, that with respect to the equity which men owe one another, he enters into an infinite number of particulars, where the most exact proportion is observed.

† These precepts, which seem to be of a different nature, have nevertheless a tendency towards this immutable law. They are a sort of counsels which tend to disengage men from the obstacles that would hinder them from reaching it.

their own discernment. He never grounds his precepts upon his own authority, but upon their agreement with common sense, upon reasons drawn from the interests of men, and upon the force of truth, which they are capable of feeling, when they do not wilfully oppose it. "If I do not speak the truth," said he, "do not believe me."

Jesus Christ did not then expect to be believed upon his word. He has invited men to examine, and made the most simple among them judges of his maxims. This examination could only take place with respect to things that are clear, simple, and obvious to all men. For if he had required it, as to things that are obscure, sublime, and incomprehensible, it would have been requiring an impossibility, and this cannot be supposed.

These things clear, simple, and obvious to all men, are the same, which at this day are offered to their examination. Among clear things, I reckon all the evident and unavoidable consequences which are comprehended in the idea of God, and of his essential attributes. Some of these things ought to be believed, or rather owned to be true. Others ought to be observed, so far as the justice of them is acknowledged. On one side, this relates to the enquiry of the supreme Being; on the other, to the free and intelligent nature with which he has endowed man, and which the Creator cannot disown, without being inconsistent with himself.

Such is the nature of the understanding, that it can believe nothing, but what it discovers to be true *; and such the nature of liberty, that it can

* Man is so framed, that he cannot believe upon compulsion: Even in the affairs of life he only believes what he discovers to be true.

only approve, or acquiesce in such things, as the understanding discovers to be just. If God should require men to believe what they cannot discern to be true, he would in that case disown the intelligent faculty, which he has given them.*; truth would no longer have any force to convince and persuade. If they can believe what they please, to what purpose should we appeal to common sense, and to what purpose is the question so frequent in every body's mouth, "Is it not true, is it not just?" accordingly we see, that Jesus Christ speaking to men, always supposes them to have understanding and liberty. He appeals to their understanding, even against the laws and customs which they reckoned to be most sacred; I speak here of the Jews, and their veneration for rites and ceremonies, such as observing the sabbath, etc.

This teacher of truth, as well as of humanity †, shews men how to make a right use of the understanding which they suffer to lie buried. He shews them the consequences, which they would naturally draw from common sense, if they consulted it; and that if they knew how to consider things in their end and use, they would see that the sabbath must have been made for man, and not man for the sabbath; in which case, the doing or receiving good on that day, could not be looked upon as a breach of it ‡.

* Man would become like those idols, of which it is said, that "they have eyes, but see not, etc."

† Jesus Christ seems in a proper sense to be the teacher of men, his doctrine comes within the reach of their understanding, he endeavours to bring them back to true simplicity, and to deliver them from yokes and customs quite foreign to their nature.

‡ Jesus Christ does more, he draws instructions from the most trivial things, from the care that every one takes of

Here the man, whom we have supposed, will find nothing that does not force his assent by virtue of its own evidence ; he will not want proofs for things which speak of themselves ; his mind will even be somewhat more easy, as to what had at first shocked him in reading Moses on the institution of ceremonies. He sees here a lawgiver, who, delivering men from a needless yoke, would only subject them to the foreign law of equity, and to the authority of good sense.

He will be only puzzled with one thing, viz. that this lawgiver destroys what the other had established. I ask him here also to suspend his judgment. It is sufficient for me, that he approves of the former, who is the lawgiver in question, and whose precepts it will be necessary to examine more fully.

L E T T E R VIII.

Examination of the accessory counsels. To what the accessory counsels relate.

S I R,

I Allow, that among the precepts of Jesus Christ, there are some which do not seem to have a direct tendency towards the great rule * mentioned above. Their end is not to be perceived immediately ; and one would be tempted to imagine, that in delivering

his ox, or his ass. He does not barely stop at the letter of the law, but enters into the spirit of it. He even goes back to the primitive law, and concludes, that it ought to take place.

* " Do to men, as you would that they should do to you."

men from the yoke of Moses, he only designed to burden them with others, which are very near quite as hard to bear *. Such are the precepts, or rather the counsels, which we find in the gospel, teaching us to renounce our most darling inclinations, the love of riches, of pleasures, and of vain reputation,

Jesus Christ seems to have directly attacked such inclinations, and that in the strongest terms. It is hard, almost impossible according to him, that a rich man should enter into the kingdom of God. "Wo unto you," says he, "that laugh now, and are full; for ye shall hunger; and ye shall mourn and weep. Wo unto you, when all men shall speak well of you."

These counsels seem harsh, and it would not be readily supposed, that the person who gives them, had only the good of men in view; one would be even apt to ascribe some selfish motive to him.

Our man will doubtless be little inclined to acquiesce in things, the justice and usefulness of which he cannot discern. It has been observed above, that it is the nature of liberty not to acquiesce in any thing, but what the understanding discovers to be just. In that case, is it meet we should encroach upon the rights of liberty? can we require a man to look upon that to be just and useful, which does not appear to him as such? or shall we make the thing more evident, by telling him, that he ought to believe it, because the Son of God said so? I am afraid, he would draw quite different conclusions from it. We would therefore be obliged to take another course.

* This may be ranked among the things which we have said to be mixed with obscurity.

Let us first observe, that the strongest censures which Jesus Christ passes upon men, are aimed at what is false and unjust, at hypocrisy, fraud, the love of vain-glory, the contempt of others, and rash judgments. In this respect only does he shew indignation, and an invincible opposition. For in other respects, he only speaks by way of advice or counsel *, intimating, that it would be for the interest of mankind to practise such and such things.

Might not we infer from this, that these advices or counsels may have some relation to the end proposed by him, viz. to destroy in man what is false and unjust, and to restore him to uprightness and integrity.

LETTER IX.

The end and use of the evangelical counsels. They relate to another period. The essential relation between justice and interest. A difficulty against this principle. The office of Jesus Christ.

S I R,

WE have observed, that revelation ought to be with respect to man, what education is with respect to children. The education given to children, relate much more to the time that is to come, than to the time present. The ordinary use that is made of it, is to form them in such a manner, that they

* Such are the counsels which tend to withdraw our affection from riches and pleasures.

may one day appear with honour in society *, and become capable of great employments. This is the end of the studies and exercises which we prescribe to them ; and for this purpose are they taught to be submissive, and to renounce their own will : for this are they warned from several things, to which they are prompted by their passions ; for this, inured to labour, fatigue, and a frugal life.

It is well known, that those who have received such an education, find themselves in the end, both happier, and more able for what they undertake, than others, whom a mistaken tenderness has too much indulged ; that these, being left to the government of their passions, are incapable of bearing the least hardships, and sink under the smallest difficulties †. To this it is owing, that such as have been made to submit for a time to a well-regulated discipline, preserve to the end of their lives the gratitude they owe their parents for an education, the fruits of which they actually reap, and the painful circumstances of which they have forgot.

If it could be demonstrated, that the doctrines of Jesus Christ tend to the same use, and that they relate to another period of much greater importance to man, than that of this life ; I say, if this should be supposed, these counsels, which, considered in themselves, seem to us harsh, will begin to alter their appearance.

* This chiefly concerns men in public posts, who design their children for great employments, either in the military or civil way.

† We find examples of this in antient history. The Lacedemonians, educated under an exact discipline, proved as it were invincible to nations brought up in luxury and effeminacy.

This would be the chief point for the man in question. Why do I say, for him? it would be so for all men, even for those who profess to receive the gospel without the least opposition. According to them, every thing in it is divine, but their conduct does not shew, that they are fully convinced of this: the most trifling interest, when set in opposition to the maxims of the same gospel, is preferred to them without the least difficulty.

What therefore can this contrast be owing to? to the reason assigned above, viz. that men only act a consistent part, with respect to what they seriously believe, and they believe nothing seriously, except what they perceive to be true. For the same reason, they do not approve or acquiesce in any thing, but what they discover to be just †. To express it better, they do not willingly submit to any thing, but what they see to be for their interest. Their interest is the grand motive, the irresistible spring that determines them.

Justice and interest are put in competition; and it is said, that justice ought to be preferred. But I am afraid, that upon this footing, interest would infallibly get the better, unless we could prove, that justice and interest are essentially but one and the same thing. In effect, interest being at bottom no more than happiness, or what conduces to it, men have it not in their power to depart from it; they are born for that end, and accordingly the notion of being happy is in them antecedent to the idea of justice.

It would therefore only be by proving to them the essential relation between what is just, and what is for their interest, and between what is unjust, and what

† An important principle, which we shall often recur to in the sequel.

is to their prejudice, that we could determine them to prefer what is just.

We began above to establish this relation, by the idea we gave of order. We have proved, that well-being is the effect of order, as pain is the consequence of disorder. But here arises a considerable difficulty, grounded on experience.

It does not appear, say they, that disorder is always attended with pain, nor that well-being is always inseparable from order *. We cannot deny it, and it would be impossible to solve the difficulty, without distinguishing between the spiritual and corporeal nature of man. It is certain, that in the corporeal nature, pain is the unavoidable effect of disorder †. There is reason to presume, that it should be so likewise in a spiritual nature. This would be undoubtedly the case, if there was between these two natures that harmony and subordination which order requires : but men are very far from being in this situation. They find by experience, that the sentiment of the corporeal nature is much stronger than that of the spiritual ; that the first bears them away, while the second only warns them. From hence it follows,

* We see disorderly persons, who are happy in several respects, and others, who notwithstanding their being orderly are oppressed with pain. It is nevertheless true, that the happiness of the former is very far from being complete, and that they are often inwardly tormented by their passions.

† We must make an exception here, viz. That the disorder may go so far as to occasion an insensibility, and not pain. This may be seen in a lethargy, etc. Something pretty much resembling this takes place in the spiritual nature. Insensibility shews, that the evil is come to its greatest height,

that the well-being of one, attended with several agreeable sensations, renders them almost insensible, as to the disorder of the other ; and that these agreeable sensations overcome the painful sentiment, which would be a symptom of that disorder.

A difficulty occurs here. Why must the corporeal nature be in a state of opposition to the spiritual? ought there not rather to be a perfect harmony between one and the other? would it not have been suitable to the wisdom of the Creator, if he had placed an essential relation between the well-being of both? by this essential relation, the whole man would be kept in a right order. For as he must necessarily wish to be happy in all respects, he would never consent to disorder, if pain was evidently annexed to it.

This difficulty leads us to an unavoidable consequence, viz. that the want of harmony denotes disorder in the whole man ; and this consequence leads us to suppose, that he was not so when he came out of the hands of his Creator ; without this, it could not be said, that man was a master-piece worthy of God, much less that he bore his image.

In effect, the first idea that offers to us concerning the supreme Being, is, that he is happy ; happy in every respect. In him happiness and justice are inseparable ; whereas in the present state of man, injustice may be attended with happiness, and justice with pain. Such a dissonance carries, as you see, a mark of imperfection and disaster, very opposite to the image of the perfect Being ; of him I say, in whom perfection and happiness are but one and the same thing.

How did this disaster happen? this is a question which presently occurs, and every body would be glad to find a distinct answer to it. If any one pretended to

have discovered the way of accounting for this, I should be overjoyed to hear it. But till that happens, I freely own I know nothing at all of the matter.

One thing that I know, and which is the proof of this disaster, is, that at the end of a few years, man is unavoidably stript of this corporeal nature, which opposed the government of the spiritual. May not this hard necessity, to which a man never submits but through constraint, to the idea of which he never reconciles himself; may not this necessity, I say, have some relation to that want of harmony which we have been just speaking of.

We have observed, that the corporeal sensations have by much the advantage of the spiritual; that thereby the most noble being is in a manner subjected to the animal part, that the latter endeavours to hinder the former from perceiving its true situation, and that this ignorance, which is more or less voluntary, only makes the evil the more inveterate.

Might it not rather be an effect of God's goodness than of his wrath, that he has pronounced upon man this sentence which seems so rigorous, "To the dust thou shalt return." Perhaps it is for the relief of the creature, that God has thus ordered it. He thereby rids man of an obstacle which would make it very difficult for him to arrive at the end for which he was designed.

By this separation, the spiritual faculties are restored to the condition of feeling and perceiving what they felt and perceived but very indistinctly before *. Man does then come to know by experience, that

* We suppose here, that the soul exists after its separation from the body, and that it is susceptible of spiritual sensations and perceptions.

pain is the unavoidable consequence of disorder in the spiritual nature, as he had found it to be in the corporeal.

But if it is true, will some say, that the body is an obstacle to man's being brought back to order, what advantage does he get by his melancholly life in this world? I answer, that this obstacle is not invincible in itself. If it becomes so to many, it is only owing to a train of habits which they have wilfully contracted. I say more: we have reason to presume, that the present life of man, if he knew how to make a right use of it, would prove very advantageous to him, with respect to the life to come.

If it was otherwise, God would bring men into a narrow passage, where they might run a great risk, without reaping the least advantage from it; a conduct no less repugnant to perfect equity, than to infinite goodness. But the difficulty would lie in being able to get through this passage, without falling into those snares with which it is beset, and the most dangerous of which are alluring. Here it is that an experienced guide would be wanted.

May not Jesus Christ be considered as this guide, and would not his counsels teach men how to discover and shun these snares? in that case his counsels would deserve more attention than they generally meet with. Perhaps it might be of use to take a nearer view of them.

L E T T E R X.

The sequel concerning the end and use of evangelical counsels. The false esteem of a man's self. The contempt of others. The spirit of dominion. The relish of luxury and effeminacy. The spirit of deciding.

S I R,

WE have observed, that the short passage of this life, though full of snares, may prove advantageous to man, if he will follow the advice and direction of an experienced guide.

Man, being a creature made up of body and soul finds himself placed in this world, as in the country of the body ; all the objects he sees having a relation to it : whereas, with respect to the soul, he is in a strange land. From thence it comes, that having his sight obstructed by a multitude of sensible objects, he forgets his noble original. The counsels of Jesus Christ tend to bring him back to himself, to free him from the fetters that might keep him in bondage, and to make the spiritual part in him rule over the corporeal.

In order that the spiritual part may bear rule, it is necessary that the spiritual faculties should be in a condition to receive the impression * of objects : and in order to receive this impression, every voluntary obstacle must be removed ; that is, man must be entirely guided in his notions by that natural light, which

* This impression consists in the sentiment and perception of what is morally good or evil, that is, of truth and falshood, of justice and injustice.

informs him concerning falshood and injustice, and discovers to him justice and truth.

When man determines himself in favour of falshood and injustice, he only does it with respect to the object of some passion. Let it be the love of gain, or that of pleasure, or any other passion you please, it is the same thing. He is resolved to gratify himself, and it is in order to compass this end, that he admits of falshood or injustice, nay, frequently both at the same time.

Here we begin to discover why Jesus Christ took pains to forwarn men of the danger into which the love of riches or pleasures almost unavoidably leads them. The danger is, lest they should get into the path of falshood and injustice. There is a slippery communication between them, which it is hard for a man to avoid, even after it is pointed out to him.

It is with such snares as these that man is surrounded. Jesus Christ, as a guide, takes care to warn him of them. For this reason likewise does he give the title of happy, to such whose condition is best secured from snares of this kind ; and the title of unhappy to those whose condition is more exposed to them.

Let us call things by their right name. It is not by way of threatening that our Saviour speaks in this manner, it is only by way of information or warning, that every man may have it in his power to take timely measures *. Is this a mark of severity, or of goodness ?

* A guide who foresees or points out precipices, does not make them : he points them out only to give people an opportunity of avoiding them.

But hold ! you will say : are riches then incompatible with integrity and a love of truth ? if they are not incompatible, they are at least dangerous ; and this is probably what Jesus meant to say. Let us describe the thing according to the true nature of it. It is not the metal we call gold, that is pernicious in itself. Nothing extraneous to a man, can necessarily make him either false or unjust ; it may indeed be the occasion of it, and this is but too much confirmed by experience.

We know how hard it is to acquire riches without violating the rules of truth and equity. Let us, however, suppose them acquired by the fairest means. The difficulty will be to enjoy them, or rather to put them to their right use. Except that be done, they will unavoidably lead us to falshood and injustice, perhaps to both.

The first kind of falshood that a wealthy condition leads to, is an indistinct opinion of a man's self *, grounded upon that alone, and mixed with a sort of disdain for those whom he sees below him : this kind of falshood, when it is not checked, begins to throw a mist over the understanding ; whence a thousand false judgments arise. The worth of things is confounded, the nature of man misunderstood, and the idea of his true dignity lost. May it not have been to rectify this kind of falshood that Jesus Christ chose to appear in an abject condition ? we have reason to think so.

Further, this falshood naturally leads to injustice, if they are not the same thing. The spirit of haugh-

* This indistinct esteem is clearly enough seen in others ; and a man might perceive it at home, if he would closely examine himself.

tiness and dominion*, the right that men assume over those who may have a dependance upon them, and their harsh way of treating such persons, are the natural consequences of it.

With how many other snares is a wealthy condition attended! the opportunity of gratifying all our inclinations, and of habituating ourselves to pleasure, luxury, and effeminacy, is none of the least. This is attended with another, viz. that of flattery, of vain applause, and of the real or feigned esteem which every one eagerly expresses for rich men. Protestations of this kind only serve to encrease the esteem they had already conceived for themselves, and to confirm them thoroughly in falshood.

It is much if the same cause does not produce in them a spirit of deciding † in matters they are the least acquainted with, in religion itself, although in other respects, it is of all things what they most neglect. They are busy to talk upon this subject, and boldly decide what is true, and what is false, in the same manner as if they had eyes to discern it, or in other words, as if he had not buried the faculty of their understanding.

Jesus Christ was pleased to discover to men the snares of a wealthy condition, and the melancholy lot of those who fall into them. By the parable he proposes ‡, and which every body knows, he vindicates the judgment which he had passed upon the different conditions of life.

* How difficult a thing it is for a man not to abuse the power which wealth gives him over the needy!

† A rich man's decisions have quite another sort of weight than those of an ordinary man.

‡ Luke, chap. xvi. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

It is difficult to persuade one's self, that the condition of a man who fares deliciously, is not more to be desired than that of a man sunk under the weight of grief and misery. Jesus Christ, by a double representation of what is present and what is to come, enables us to judge which of the two conditions is preferable.

But hold ! could a man, who should neither be false nor unjust, who should be content to fare deliciously, without injuring any body ; I say, could such a man be thought worthy of punishment ? is the having his good things in his life-time *, a crime that must necessarily be followed with evils, as the parable supposes.

I answer, that a sensual man, who should neither be false nor unjust †, would be a kind of Phoenix. But were it true, that he did no injury to others, we have the greatest reason to think that he would do a great deal to himself. To judge of this, we need only recall the idea that has been already given of order, which consists in this, that all the different faculties, wherewith a man is endowed, are put to their right use, and directed to their true end.

* A man's having received his good things in his life-time, does not barely denote that he was rich. We have already observed, that what is extraneous to man, cannot hurt him, but in so far as he makes a wrong use of it. One may be rich without being sensual, and sensual without being rich. The question here, is about a man, who mistaking his true good, makes it to consist in every thing that flatters his senses ; who, imagining that all was made for himself, does not even suppose that his riches were given him to relieve the indigence of others.

† A sensual man is false in this respect, that he mistakes the true worth of things.

Man is susceptible of two sorts of sensations, viz. Corporeal and spiritual. Though these sensations are different from one another, the soul is the only principle of both. The corporeal sensations are strong, and capable of bearing us away; the spiritual are delicate, and can only warn us. Hence it follows, that the more a man gives himself up to corporeal sensations, the more are the spiritual weakened; and that if he gives himself entirely up to the former, the latter will come to be almost extinguished.

It is easy to conclude from this, that the man we speak of, having received little or no information, as to what is morally good or evil, will hardly be able to make a just distinction between the two; that being drawn by the taste of the senses, to what is agreeable, which to him appears the only good, he will be almost entirely insensible as to the good or evil of another kind; and that far from being affected with any inward disorder, he will perhaps be an utter stranger to it.

This will undoubtedly be the case, if he commits no glaring acts of injustice, if he is not in a situation to do hurt; and if, as it may happen, he is satisfied with his own riches, and does not seek to invade the property of others.

Such a man may applaud himself on this account, and look down with contempt * on those who come under the denomination of rogues, and who perhaps only became such through the temptation of poverty, and to satisfy the wants of nature. But is not the comparison he draws between himself and them, altogether void of proportion, and unjust for that

* How much falshood and injustice do we find in this comparison! a probity of this kind will lose a good deal of its weight, when considered in its true light.

very reason ? the least part of his superfluities would have been over and above sufficient to keep these people honest, whom mere indigence reduced to be thieves †. In this case, how much lighter must he be found than these, if they were fairly weighed together in the ballance, which will probably happen sooner or later !

All things duly considered, it will appear that this man, who imagined there was no harm in enjoying life without wronging any body, is not free from injustice, setting aside the injury which he may have done to himself.

This is a point which nearly concerns mankind, and which the counsels of Jesus Christ have solely in view. Supposing this to be true, the idea of rigour, which is commonly annexed to them, has no longer any foundation.

L E T T E R XI.

The ground of compensation. The scene shifted.

S I R,

IT would not be amiss to examine here, what can be the ground of this declaration, which appears so harsh : “ Thou in thy life-time receivedst thy “ good things ; therefore art thou tormented.”

When we consider the strange inequality among men, and at the same time remember that they are all of an equal dignity, both with respect to body

† An observation of very great importance, and which would be sufficient to rectify an infinite number of false judgments.

and mind, it cannot but surprize us. We allow indeed, that some sort of inequality is necessary for the sake of order, because without this there would be no subordination; and without subordination, men could not form societies or united bodies. From thence we learn, that providence has been able to bring this kind of order out of disorder itself.

It must nevertheless be owned, that this is not entirely satisfactory. A man would be much better satisfied, if he saw the whole subordination consist in this, that some men were raised higher than the rest; some of them being appointed to govern and to take care of the public interest, others to obey like freemen, and to enjoy the fruits of a well-regulated government. But when he perceives that this inequality among men is confined to no degree, but runs into extremes, and loses all proportion, that some are the slaves * of others, and that some want the very necessities of life, while others are glutted with superfluities: it is here that his mind cannot be satisfied, and his amazement increases.

He puts another question to himself, what can these men have merited before they were born, to be thus highly distinguished above the rest? He is tempted to accuse providence of partiality, in its dispensations to mankind.

If he comes to consider the thing more closely, and trace thousands of men from their cradle to their grave, he will not be able to conceive for what end they received their being. They are debarred from every thing that is pleasing in nature, from all the

* Although slavery, properly so called, is not allowed among christians, it is nevertheless true, that poverty and misery render a good part of mankind slaves to their fellow-creatures.

innocent comforts which she presents to men. They feel without allay, all the rigours of the seasons, and they do not enjoy the temperate part of them. The necessities of life give them no respite, and deny them that repose which nature requires. They know not whether the soul differs in any respect from the objects that strike their senses. The greatest part of them seem to be made for no other end but to talk to horses and mules. The masters seem to value them but very little more ‡ than the beasts which they commit to their care.

Liberty, that invaluable blessing, is unknown to them. Freedom of thought is still more so. They do not so much as know what use they might make of the faculty of thinking: their thoughts are all employed about prosecuting their labour, or guarding against pain §.

On the contrary, we see others for whom all nature seems to have been made. This is saying too little: nature alone, rich as she is, does not satisfy them: their fellow creatures, who seem likewise to have been made for them, must go thro' immense toils, in order to improve upon nature by every thing that art can invent. If the capacity of these is almost solely employed in bearing their hardships, or providing against pain, that of the others is not less industrious to procure pleasure, and to refine upon all the comforts which nature presents to them with a lavish hand.

‡ Perhaps they value them less. How many masters are there, who take in comparably more care of their horses than of their domestics?

§ It is for this reason that extreme poverty is commonly attended with stupidity.

The leisure which they procure to themselves by the labour of others *, would be a burthen to them, if they did not croud into it every thing that they can invent to amuse either the senses or mind, for they likewise bestow pains upon the latter: they want to have it as much adorned as the body: they enrich it with what they call polite learning. Some of them do more; they cultivate it in some sort, they philosophize and reflect.

When they come afterwards to cast their eyes upon these unpolished men †, whose minds are, as it were, buried under the weight of labour; labour which only tends to nothing else but to gratify their passions, and to make them live more at ease, in what a contemptuous light do they consider them! “Bless us! What a race of animals these creatures are! What trouble it costs one to make them good for any thing! They have not so much as the shadow of good sense; and nothing but severity has the least influence upon them.” In this manner do these two sets of men finish their career.

* It is to be observed, that the leisure of some is only procured by the labour of others, which for this reason falls so heavy upon them. At the time when labour was divided, it was not at all immoderate. Labourers were philosophers, and philosophers were not ashamed of being labourers. A moderate degree of labour leaves the mind all the liberty it has occasion for, and rescues man from a lethargic or a sensual disposition, which is the effect of too much leisure.

† Nothing can be more false and unjust, than such a parallel. These men of a polished understanding should at least learn to set a just value upon it, and to know that it costs these very men whom they despise, a great deal more trouble to act the part of stupid creatures, than it does them to act the part of men of letters.

The scene ends here with respect to us, and our senses can carry us no further. But may we not penetrate beyond what our senses discover to us? Are not we led by a profound and indelible sentiment to suppose a different scene beyond the term of life.

Let us forget, if it is necessary, whatever prejudice and education may have taught us concerning the other world, and let us only consult our own reason. What is the idea that naturally presents itself to us, when we reflect upon the lot of these men, whom we have just seen acting such different parts? Let us only suppose that they continue to exist, and retain the principle of the sensations which they had in this life.

The first inference that can be drawn in favour of those who stopped under the weight of labour, is, that they enjoy the pleasure of rest. In effect, the cruel necessity of toiling for their bread, does not torment them any more. The exemption from such a torment, is to them a comfort altogether new.

Another change in their condition, is the liberty which they recover, and which they fancy they acquire, so little was that blessing known to them. They had not so much as imagined that this was a privilege attached to their being; the discovery which they make of it, is only so much the more charming †

To how many kind of discoveries does not this lead them to! Their faculties that were buried, begin to display themselves, they perceive the treasure which they possessed, without knowing it. Truth,

† This conjecture is very probable, at least if we suppose that death doth not destroy in man the faculty of thinking.

which discovers itself to their understanding in a proportionable manner, makes them feel a pleasure of which they had no idea before *. The remembrance of their former state †, gives them a more lively relish for the advantage of that upon which they begin to enter.

It would be easy to push our conjectures further, without giving into any extravagant notions. But let us stop here with respect to these men, and cast our eyes upon those who acted an opposite part.

The first idea that offers, with respect to them, is, that the sensible objects, which made a thou-

* The pleasures of the understanding, which are so well adapted to the nature of man, must have something more transporting for those, who had no idea of them.

† Some will perhaps question the possibility of this remembrance, and urge that the memory is corporeal. But without pretending to decide the matter, I only say, that if there did not remain in man a sentiment or an idea of essential things, there could be no room for any retribution after this life, since no man could acquiesce in the punishment he was to suffer, if he did not feel and remember that he had brought it upon himself. It is in vain to philosophize upon this maxim, that the memory is corporeal, with a design to persuade one's self, that there is then no futurity to be looked for, no relation between this life and the other. If you suppose this, you must at the same time deny that God is just and equitable. For that he should send thousands of men into the world, to suffer without the least prospect of a compensation, and consent that others should be there, only to enslave their fellow-creatures, is a thing not to be imagined. Those who believe the gospel, will not bring the thing in question. This sentence of Jesus Christ, "I was naked, and ye cloathed me," is only grounded on this remembrance: and without going further, the parable of the rich man supposes it in the plainest terms, "Remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things."

and agreeable impressions upon them, subsist no longer ‡.

A second idea, is, that they see themselves stript of whatever we call ornaments of the mind, the pains they have bestowed for that purpose are lost.

They fancied themselves born to command, they had round them a set of people, who were only made to serve either their passions or interests. Here no man regards them : their desires and their strongest inclinations meet with opposition, which is so much the more galling to them, as it is new.

The conclusion of the parable above mentioned, is this ; “ Thou receivest thy good things in thy lifetime, therefore art thou tormented.” The good things which these men enjoyed, the pleasures which those good things procured to them, all are taken away, and this raises in them a thirst which devours them.

The poor man on the contrary, when he quits the body, far from leaving good things and pleasures behind him, leaves nothing but poverty and pain. How different is this change !

What has been said, does undoubtedly give great light into the end and use of the evangelical counsels §, and clears them from the charge of harshness. Have we not sufficient reason to conclude, that he who gives them is perfectly disinterested, and that the justice which he requires from men, is, in all respects, the same with their interest. When I say interest, I do not mean that which is confined to this world, but

‡ In what a dreadful vacuum does this leave them !

§ The practical consequences which arise from thence, have a very different force from such as are grounded upon the authority of a lawgiver, who has an arbitrary power to impose laws on those who are under his jurisdiction.

the interest which affects the whole man through the whole duration of his existence.

LETTER XII.

The sequel concerning the end of the evangelical counsels. The cause of the necessity of chusing. The cause of persecution.

S I R,

WHAT you observe is true, viz. that men are infinitely more affected with what concerns their interest in this life, than with what concerns their interest in the life to come. They look upon the latter to be a great way off, and objects make a much fainter impression upon them, on account of this supposed distance.

To bring the prospect nearer, is the very end of the evangelical counsels. They serve to awaken our attention with regard to things which we might see very near us †, if we did not strive to avoid the sight of them.

Let men be ever so strongly attached to the time present, they cannot help extending their view farther; futurity presents itself to them a thousand ways, and when the question is only about a temporal futurity, they do not want prudence, shall I say? or foresight; it is all one. In this respect they know how to calculate, weigh, compare, and fairly state the reasons *pro* and *con*.

† The life to come is really very near man, and it is only by a gross imposition upon themselves, that they come to consider it as at a great distance.

In general, the capacity which men have to calculate, weigh, etc. is the foundation of their conduct, and of all the prudence which they can acquire. The most stupid clown can make use of it ; he renounces a present good §, to procure a future one that is more considerable ; of two evil which he foresees, he resolves to chuse the least.

It is upon the supposition that men have this capacity, that Jesus Christ speaks to them ‡. He does not advise them to renounce a present good, without shewing that it may be hurtful to them ; he does not exhort them to suffer evil, without letting them see that they are under a necessity to chuse either these or others that are much worse.

What we are surprized at, is, that men should be reduced to this hard necessity.

This necessity is a consequence of the general disorder. Was it not for this disorder, we should not be reduced to such a melancholy choice : but things being as they are, it follows, that those who aim at order in themselves, must act in opposition to the general disorder. If they gave way, they are carried down with the current ; if they resist in good earnest, they must suffer.

The general disorder consists in this, that falshood prevails among men. Some are guilty of it in every respect, as well in the will as in the judgments which they form of things. Others are only so through prejudice ; they judge by the example, and see every thing by the eyes of other men.

§ He often employs for seed, part of his necessary provision.

‡ This confirms what has been laid down, viz. that the religion essential to man, bears a relation to his natural faculties, and tends to exercise them.

It is to such persons as these, that Jesus Christ directs his discourse; his purpose is to deliver them from this slavery, and to restore them to the prerogative of human nature. "Judge not according to appearance," says he to them, "but let your judgment be right." This is a difficult point to arrive at. In the affairs of life, men are wont to see, weigh, and thoroughly examine a thing, before they judge of its value; but in religion, it is not so; they judge before they see, weigh, and examine; and the slightest appearance is sufficient to determine them in their judgments.

In common life, there are fixed measures and weights, in the application of which men are agreed. The rule or plummet discovers what is flanting or oblique, and a pair of scales exactly determines the weight of a thing. In religion, men have no fixed measure, or to use a better expression (for this would reflect upon the Author of nature and religion) they have measures, which would not be less certain in their kind, but either they cannot or will not make use of them.

They cannot however avoid having recourse to certain measures, in order to judge of what is presented to them. The misfortune is, that they set aside the true measures, and substitute the false ones in their room. These false measures are suggested to us by prejudice, blind credulity, or our own interest. We see an axample of this in the men among whom Jesus Christ was conversant. How different were the judgments that they passed upon him! some said, "He is a good man:" others, "Nay, but he seduceth the people." Some said, "He has a devil:" others, "He is a prophet." They had therefore very different weights and measures.

Hence, no doubt, proceed our dissensions in point of religion : persecution itself is owing to the same cause. It is by this means, that Jesus Christ and his disciples have been misunderstood ; and to this relate a number of evangelical declarations, which are harsh in themselves *, and in which it is not easy to acquiesce.

It appears from hence, that the choice to which men may be reduced, is only a natural consequence of the state of things † : that it is not a yoke imposed in an arbitrary manner, as many people imagine.

The reason is, that neither in this, nor in any other respect, does providence force nature by thwarting its ordinary course. What will the consequence be ? is it to be thought, that in following this same course, the men, who shall maintain their ground against falshood and injustice, will ever have cause to repent of it ? far from it. Here every thing within us speaks for the negative, every thing leads us to the idea of a future compensation ‡ ; to this relate these evangelical declarations, the energy of which is very little perceived ; “ Blessed are those that weep,

* Those which invite us to take up our cross, and to undergo persecutions.

† We may conclude from this, that the cause of persecution is only accidental, the proof of which is clear. Suppose all men were brought back to order, or into the way that leads to it, and there will be no such thing as persecution.

‡ It is here, that we can make use of measures that are liable to no uncertainty. As often as we observe, in the time past or present, those acts of cruelty and injustice, which crush and trample upon innocence with impunity, we are ready to declare, that there must be a future state of rewards and punishments.

"for they shall be comforted," etc. These declarations teach us nothing new, nothing of which we did not find an indelible impression in our minds *.

After what has been said, it is our business to calculate, weigh, and compare what is for our interest in this life, with what is for our interest in the life to come.

L E T T E R XIII.

Concerning mysteries. Whether it is possible to explain mysteries. Whether it would be inconvenient to own our ignorance. Conclusion.

S I R,

YOU allow, that according to the light in which we have hitherto viewed the doctrine of the gospel, it might be fully justified.

But, in your opinion, the most difficult examination still remains ; namely, that of mysteries. That it is the most difficult I grant you ; but I doubt whether it is the most necessary ; and am even afraid, that there is more inconveniency than usefulness in it.

One inconveniency which I find in it is this, that if we shift the scene, if we see a chaos of difficulties, nay contrarieties, instead of that religion which is so simple, harmonious, and consistent with itself, and

* We may observe here, that it is likewise as a consequence of the natural course of things, that this compensation takes place. We see an example of it in the preceding letter.

all the conclusions of which tend so strongly and so naturally to practice, it is to be feared, that we may throw a mist over evidence itself. This methinks is what is called building, in order to pull down.

To take the matter right, the word mystery ought to excuse me from entering into this examination. Mystery denotes something hid, impenetrable, far above the reach of human understanding, something not revealed, and the knowlege of which God hath reserved for himself. One thing will be granted me, namely, that whatever is essential for man to know, ought to be, either evident in itself, or clearly revealed. One of these things hardly differs from the other, if they are not the same. In effect, whatever is evident has no need to be revealed; it is already so, though what is called written revelation, does not particularly mention it. On the contrary, as this written revelation does not remove what is hidden and impenetrable in the mysteries, which are therein mentioned, it is natural to conclude from thence, that these mysteries are not revealed.

Let us suppose for a while, that those who admit the written revelation, were agreed together in reverencing as mysteries above their reach, whatever exceeds their understanding, or appears opposite to simple and universal notions, and that they confine themselves to evident and undoubted truths; what would be the consequence of this? we should be ignorant of a great many things.

In effect, we should be ignorant of that art which passes under the name of controversy, and which has supported so many printing-houses: we should have no idea of those distinctions of words, of those subdivisions *in infinitum*, which have enriched diction-

aries. We should be ignorant of all those names of sects, Arianism, Pelagianism, Socinianism, etc. we should not have known to what a pitch animosity, rancour, bigotry, and ambition can be carried under the name of zeal.

Let us grant it, we should be ignorant of many things, and the world would be at a great loss by it. But would not the world have been a gainer in other respects? at least that part of it, which we call Christendom, would have reaped an infinite advantage from it. Wars about religion, which of all wars are the bloodiest, had never been known. Christians would have made the study of religion consist in becoming good men. The gospel would only lead them to that; in every page of it, they would find instructions tending to make them sincere, equitable, and beneficent. Every man, who should be wanting in those virtues, or who should have their opposite vices, would be deemed void of religion. What is called devotion would not supply the place of religion, where the fundamentals of it are wanting. Men would not damn one another; that privilege would be unknown to them. They would be as little acquainted with that of tyrannizing over the consciences of men.

Much might be said on this head. Let us agree, that if upon one side we should be ignorant of many things, we should have in exchange, a good deal of experience, which we now have not.

But hold; in this case, religion would be reduced to something so very simple, that the most illiterate men might understand it. What advantage would the learned have over them? and would it be reasonable, that they who consume themselves in laborious researches about mysteries, should have made

no further progress, than the greatest part of those illiterate persons? I know not if that would be reasonable; but I know, that the religion which is essential to man, ought to be within the reach of the illiterate: and besides, I well know, that the preacher of the gospel did offer to preach it to these, and consequently adapted it to their capacity. I think we may justly conclude likewise, that he did not require them to penetrate into things which are obscure; and I am inclined to think, that what is a mystery to the illiterate, will be equally so to those learned men, who have exhausted themselves perhaps in useless researches.

Is this a conjecture only? not in the least.

It is confirmed by the most certain experience. We know very well, that these learned men have multiplied contradictions, in proportion as they attempted to explain these mysteries; and that from their pretended explanations have proceeded the most obstinate controversies.

To fear lest religion should be reduced to something too simple, is to fear, lest it should be too easy to be laid hold on; and lest it should be too much above those difficulties and vain cavils, wherein all controversies end at last.

But shall we destroy all mysteries? by no means. I reverence them as such, and take care not to condemn what is above my understanding; and for this reason, I do not presume to remove the difficulties which attend them. What answer must be made in this case to Jews, Mahometans, and Deists, who require you to explain mysteries to them? an answer that would become every person, who knows the bounds of his understanding, and which men of sense

will not be ashamed to make, viz. "I know nothing of them, or I do not understand them."

It is the very reverse of this, which has rendered the christian religion odious to these different orders of men. A frank confession of our ignorance, had been of all inconveniencies the least to be feared, and had probably cut off a great many endless altercations. In effect, it is much easier for men to content themselves with an acknowledgement of one's ignorance, than to acquiesce in defective and false solutions; which far from removing the difficulties, only serve to multiply them.

This being certainly the case, I think we may conclude, that the most reasonable course which they can take who are lovers of truth, would be to embrace in its full force this maxim which is so well known: "Things which are hid, are to God; but things revealed are to us, and to our children to do them."

L E T T E R X I V .

The essential religion is not mysterious. Characters easy to be read.

S I R,

THINGS revealed are those which must be practised *, that is, they bear a relation to the course which a man must take in order to arrive

* By things revealed, we must not understand merely what is contained in the written revelation, but in general, all clear and undoubted truths. It has been remarked, that whatever is evident is considered as revealed upon that sin-

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at happiness. It was worthy of the goodness of God to leave nothing mysterious or incomprehensible in this respect ; nothing but what every man should be capable of feeling and comprehending : I say every man, without excepting the most illiterate. The religion which is essential to man, ought to be of such a nature, that it cannot escape any person who desires to embrace it. It ought not to depend upon an art, which all people have not the opportunity of learning : its principles ought as it were to be written in man himself.

This is a command, which is neither too high nor too remote, and to find which, we need neither ascend into heaven, nor go down into hell ; every one may find it ingraven, as it were, in his own mind. These characters are divine, they do not express opinions, but sentiments ; they bear witness not only to what is true, but to what is just. It is to read and study those characters, that men must be invited ; they are all capable of doing it in some degree.

gle account ; and that the written revelation contains several obscure things, which, for that very reason, are not revealed. Truths relating to practice, which of all others are the most essential, are certainly the most evident ; and these are things which are revealed.

* The art of reading.

L E T T E R X V.

*The end or design of religion. Unanimous suffrages.
The end quite simple, and near at hand. Many
means are superfluous. Religion drawn from sim-
plicity. Why simplicity is not relished.*

S I R,

WHEN we put this question to ourselves, What is the end or design of religion? the most natural answer which occurs, is, that religion should tend to make us good men; that is, upright, equitable, beneficent, sincere, or true in our discourse, as well as in our conduct.

If we collect upon this head the suffrages of all those who pass under the name of Christians, we shall find, that they unanimously approve of this answer. Nay, methinks, the Jews and Mahometans would likewise approve of it. To agree as to the end or design of a thing, is to agree in the main. How shall we conceive after this, that men who agree upon the end of religion, should oppose, nay be animated and irreconcilably bent against each other upon what they call religion. This has long been matter of great surprize. It is observed, that they agree upon the end, but differ about the means. Here is therefore the cause of all their controversies, janglings, dissensions, nay, I may say, persecutions; for the thing is but too evident.

From whence can this proceed? might it not be from this, that we employ means remote and manifold, to arrive at an end which is near at hand and

simple ; an end, which every man may attain without making so many windings. In effect, if all the labour that is taken about religion, if all the commentaries upon the scripture, if the huge volumes of divinity, morality, and controversy, tend only to that end *, a much shorter way might be taken to arrive at it.

The end of religion is, as we have said, to make men upright, equitable, true, etc. Is this end so remote, so inaccessible, and incomprehensible ? must we, before we are capable of attaining it, be perfectly well acquainted with the scriptures ? or rather, must we thoroughly know all the different senses which are put upon the several passages of it ? this would signify nothing yet. Must we then have determined which of all these is the true and genuine sense ? for it is evident, that without this, all our former study would be to no purpose. Would it be only then, that I should be capable to feel and to discern what it is to be upright, equitable, and true, and that I should become so myself ? but, perhaps, the whole of my life would not be sufficient for such a study ; and that at last I should not meet with the satisfaction I desire. At what time then must I begin to be a good man ?

Let us observe here, that men are not very consistent with themselves, because they have very faint ideas of what they advance ; of what they seem to allow.

It is with them, as with a traveller, who should name a house without knowing it, and should set out for it. It is shewn to him very near the place where he passes ; he says, that this is not the house, and

* They have many other uses besides those which are mentioned.

that he has a great deal further to go; he proceeds in his journey, travels over vast countries, and finds it no where.

This is the very thing that happens to those in question here. After they have readily agreed, that the great end of religion is to make men upright, sincere, equitable, etc. shew them that this end is simple and near at hand, that it depends on the will, and not upon occasions. Ha! say they, that would be making religion a very simple thing indeed. No! we must know many other things in order to be christians; there are doctrines we must believe, and mysteries we must embrace.

It seems then, that these doctrines and mysteries do not tend to make us good men? pardon me, say you, that is their sole end. Very well: I would only have one thing explained to me. Are uprightness and sincerity requisite for a man who would succeed in that study? a fine question truly, say you. It is for want of uprightness and sincerity, that these doctrines and mysteries have kindled so much discord among Christians, and especially among divines.

What do you tell me! it may happen then, that if any person should undertake that study, before he is a good man in some degree, it would make him worse than he was, instead of improving him*. This is undeniable.

* This is so true, that a man who should begin to study religion in the doctrinal and mysterious part of it, would at last gain nothing but a confusion of ideas, and a spirit of wrangling, which would render him more unfit than ever for the study of himself; a study without which it is impossible for him to become a good man: this is but too well proved by experience.

I have therefore a new reason for taking the short way, which cannot lead me from the end.

It must be agreed, that this end and this way are relished by very few persons; the study of them is too simple, and sends us too often to consult ourselves: or if that study is approved, it is only in other people; as for ourselves, we are glad to expatiate in the ample field of speculations and opinions; and we go so far beyond the end, that we forget what it is. If any man ventures to shew it at a distance, he is despised and pitied. To what does he pretend to reduce religion? this is emaciating it, and making it a skeleton. Here it will be necessary to explain ourselves. We mean not to limit or confine religion: on the contrary, we would remove all the limits which men have fixed to it: we only distinguish the essential part from that which is merely accessory *. We grant that those, who have embrac-

* The essential part is that fund of uprightness and sincerity, by which we acquiesce in every truth that is either palpable or evident, and which makes us act accordingly. The accessory part is a knowledge of particular things offered to us in the scripture. If this definition seems bold, it will not be a hard matter to defend it.

When a thing contains two parts, the one essential, the other accessory; to know which is the essential, you cut off one part, and if this does not destroy the essence of the thing, you judge that the part cut off is only accessory. Now I ask, if you remove from the idea of religion, that fund of uprightness, which we suppose, and substitute in its room, all that acquired knowledge which the written revelation offers, what would happen? would a man in this case have any religion?

On the other hand, if you remove from religion that acquired knowledge, and substitute in its room a fund of uprightness, such as we have just described, I ask whether a man in this case would be void of religion? it may how-

ed the former, may expatiate in the latter, and consider all the objects which offer themselves to their view, as far as it can reach. But we suppose, that they who should begin with the accessory part, would be in great danger of missing the essential *.

LETTER XVI.

Concerning faith. What is the object of faith. Conclusion. A definition authorised by the scripture.

S I R,

I Speak, say you, of sincerity, as of the soul of religion, while I do not mention faith. I own this remark surprized me, and still more, when I saw that you pressed me to give you a definition of faith.

ever be observed, that what is only accessory with respect to one man, may be essential with respect to another. For if sincerity requires me to assent to every truth, that is either sensible or evident, all the truths which may appear to me as such, become essential with respect to me. This is a very material remark.

* A man who begins with the simple parts of religion, and acts consistently with his knowledge, acquires thereby a taste and discernment, which enable him to consider a greater variety of objects, and to distinguish and set a just value upon them. He may safely examine the different opinions, and opposite systems, about which divines quarrel. When once he has a sure footing, this examination becomes a mere sport to him, and does not move him out of his place. But a man, who should begin with considering opinions, not having in himself a standard of a just discernment, would fall into extremes, and infallibly lose his way. The smallest glimmering of truth would content him,

May I venture to tell you, that I have forgot all those definitions of it, which I had learned in my catechism. The only idea I retain of it is, that there must be four kinds of faith. You however speak only of one; which of these four kinds is this one? it is probably the last, the name of which I still remember; it is called justifying faith. I fear I shall suffer in your good opinion of me, when I own to you that I never understood it. This however is literally true; and if our salvation depends upon this faith, I must be in great danger.

I conclude, that you could not address yourself to a more improper person than I am to give you a definition of faith; for as I am not a divine, it is not my business to invent one; and to this I would be reduced, since I have entirely forgot that which I once learned. This, by the by, ought not to surprise you: I knew it only by rote; as for a meaning, I could fix none upon it; and when our memory fails us in such a case, all is lost.

I am now therefore obliged to go to my catechism once more, and to put this question to myself, What is faith? Let us use some expedient to prevent its happening to me, as it happened in time past. Let us attempt to answer in other words; perhaps they will give me some idea of faith.

What is faith then? might it not be essentially a sure notion, an evident perception concerning the deity and his essential attributes? this may be thought a very extraordinary definition: but you will suffer it to pass, if you attend to my design, which is to endeavour after some way of expressing the thing that may leave me some idea of it. I am much mistaken, if the idea is lost in this definition. The question is, whether this is a true definition, and

I agree to renounce it, if it is a false one. Now which way must we judge of this?

I ask what must be the object of faith? it may either be God, or men. Not the latter, say you, for in that case, it would be only a human faith. We must have a divine faith, God alone must be the object of it.

I again ask, is this object known or unknown? It is known without doubt. Where is the cause of this knowlege? I can find it no where but in the object itself, and in the capacity he has given me to perceive it. This being supposed, the new definition will be found just, faith will be essentially no more than a certainty, grounded on the natural knowlege we may have of the attributes of the supreme Being.

Let us see what may here be objected. Faith, say they, must be founded on the gospel. Very well. But what is the gospel grounded upon? is it not on these certain notions, on that evident perception of the deity and his attributes? without supposing this certainty, the gospel has no foundation. By what mark, or criterion, shall I know it to be divine, if I have not an indelible idea of what is divine?

To compare the gospel with our notions of a deity *, supposes, that these are the rule or standard by which we are to judge of it. Now a rule or standard have in them something fixed and determinate, and are very independent of what is to be measured by them.

I conclude from hence, that the faith which is fixed and invariable, must have the deity alone for its

* The divines cannot prove the truth of the gospel, but by comparing it with the idea we have of a deity.

object ; and that the faith which has the gospel for its object, is only relative and subordinate to the other : that the former is in the power of all men * : and that the latter does not depend upon them. That incredulity † in the former respect is criminal, and in the latter excusable ‡.

May we not find something in the scripture that will confirm our definition ? here is one equivalent to it, and which deserves to be well considered.

“ Without faith,” says the apostle, “ it is impossible to please God ; for,” adds he, “ he that cometh unto God, must believe that he is :” and what more ? “ and that he is a Rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” Nothing can be plainer, more evident, and invariable than this idea of faith. The apostle does not speak here of believing without knowing ; but of believing what we see and touch, as it were ; I speak of the being of a God. This is the first thing that offers itself to our faith, or knowledge, and of which men can hardly doubt. The second relates to what God is with respect to men ; he is the rewarder or benefactor, etc.

Very luckily we find here the grand principle of the self-sufficient Being, of a Being perfectly disinterested, who invites men to seek him ; not that he may reap

* The faith which the religion essential to man requires, ought to be within the reach of every body. It would be injurious to the deity to suppose it otherwise.

† This incredulity is criminal, because it proceeds from a wilful blindness : the first truths are so evident, that we cannot be ignorant of them, unless we are wilfully so.

‡ Incredulity in this respect may be excusable, because it may proceed from a want of evidence, or from several foreign causes, wherein the will has no share.

any advantage from it, but to make them partaker of the happiness which he enjoys.

It looks as if St. Paul * made haste to represent the Deity in this light, without entering into a detail of his several attributes †. He supposes them, and makes them all center in this, of his being a rewarder or benefactor, etc. and thus he strongly interests every man, who is capable of being affected with his real interest.

LETTER XVII.

The sequel concerning faith. The foundation of faith. The exercise of faith. An example.

S I R,

IT must be owned, that hardly any subject has been more controverted, or hitherto worse explained, than that of faith. Some have affirmed, that faith and evidence are inconsistent, and others, that faith without evidence, is only a blind credulity.

Can we not reconcile these seeming contrarieties? the thing appears to me to be practicable, and that, without laying aside the definition we have given of faith. Let us make a distinction between the principle or foundation of faith, and the exercise of it. I will say, that with respect to the former, evidence and

* Or whoever is the author of the epistle to the Hebrews

† It would not be enough for man to know that God is almighty, wise, just, beneficent, if he could not be assured, that the same Being, perfectly happy in himself, likewise endeavours to make happy all the beings whom he has created.

certainty are essential to faith, and at the same time, I will grant that they are not always necessary with respect to the latter.

This proposition will be illustrated by a distinction which we have already made *, between " the general views of the Deity, with respect to mankind, and the particular and infinitely different means which the supreme wisdom makes use of to arrive at his ends."

We shall find the foundation of faith in the first respect. This foundation will be the certainty we may have that the general views of the Deity with regard to mankind, are invariably grounded upon his goodness. This foundation will be a certainty † with respect to us.

We shall find the exercise of faith in the second respect. This exercise will be founded on the knowledge of wisdom, which undoubtedly concurs in the same end, but which is unsearchable. It is in an obedience and submission to the orders of his wisdom, that the exercise of faith will consist. The obscurity we may find in the various conduct of this wisdom, will border upon uncertainty; but that will be only in appearance, it will not be less certain in the main. Faith will therefore be evident and obscure at the same time; evident in its principle, and obscure in some of its effects.

An example will illustrate this. A wise father of a numerous family, will be solely employed in rendering it happy; he will be considered in that light,

* See letters fourth and fifth in the fourteen letters.

† This relates to what has been advanced, that men can only judge of uncertainty, by what is certain. See the introduction to the fourteen letters.

both by his children and his domestics ; his design will not be doubtful. He will nevertheless observe a very different conduct in educating his children ; he will accommodate himself to their respective capacities, and give his particular directions according to the several ways of life, for which he designs them. How great a difference will he make in the task he prescribes to them, without always letting them know his particular reasons for it ! where lies the foundation of a blind obedience to his orders ? in the certainty they have, that he means only to make them happy, that he sees farther than they do, and knows thoroughly the ways of arriving at that happiness, which he endeavours to procure them.

Such was the nature of Abraham's faith. The advocates for faith without evidence, alledge him as the most express example of a blind obedience. He consented to go to a strange land, without knowing whither he went. This is nothing, when compared with that extraordinary pitch to which he carried his obedience, by being ready to sacrifice his own son.

I grant all this. But was not this blind obedience grounded upon some certainty ? it was, without doubt ; otherwise Abraham had not been commended for his faith *. He certainly knew whom he obeyed ; he must have had, in that respect, an undoubted evidence. He knew the goodness, equity, and almighty power of his Master. That order appeared to him, to be inconsistent with God's equity, as well as his goodness : it was more than obscure and incomprehensible, it was quite shocking. However, relying steadily upon what he knew to be cer-

* It would have been the most unnatural, and most barbarous action,

tain *, he judged that the Deity could not act inconsistently with his infinite goodness, and might restore that very son to him whom he had taken from him †. Be that as it will, Abraham obeyed, and had no occasion to repent it ‡.

I am of opinion, that it would not be a hard matter to reconcile, by this way of considering faith, the most obstinate controversies upon the subject. The most opposite divines make use of the same example, to confirm their contrary opinions §. To mitigate their zeal, we need only shew them that what they thought to be inconsistent, may very well be reconciled. They were all in the right, in some degree ||; and wanted only to understand one another.

* This is no more than the certainty he had that the order came from God himself.

† Hebr. xi. 19.

‡ This example will have no weight with those who suspect the truth of most of the historical facts related in the old testament, and are even shocked at the injustice and cruelty of this order. But as this is cited only by way of example, and not at all by way of proof, they who do not admit the truth of the fact, may observe that no stress is laid upon it.

§ St. Paul and St. James seems likewise to build opposite doctrines upon the example of Abraham. One says, that he was justified by faith, and the other that he was justified by works.

|| They were all likewise in the wrong, as they retorted upon one another the title of heretics.

LETTER XVIII.

*The cause of the different opinions concerning faith.
A misconstruction. A demonstration. The system
of imputed righteousness contradictory.*

S I R,

IT is certain, that the dark expressions which the apostles have made use of in describing faith, have not a little contributed to the diversity of opinions among divines upon this subject. These expressions, which are not only ambiguous, but often seemingly opposite to each other, have met with zealous advocates on both sides, who have scrupulously adhered to the literal sense of them. Such are those expressions which you mention. "A man's own righteousness, imputed righteousness, justification by faith, justification by works."

What a jumble of contrarieties have not such expressions produced! Whatever efforts have been made to discover the sense of them, by setting us free from a slavish adherence to words, there still remain in the mind certain difficulties which it is hard to remove.

Is it not possible for us to know exactly wherein these difficulties consist? or rather, can we not discover what it is that renders these expressions liable to ambiguity and misconstruction? for, if the apostles could not contradict one another, there must certainly be some misconstruction in the case. Let us consult the apostles themselves, and argue upon their own definitions, not upon such as are obscure, but such as are evident. Let us return to that which we

have already mentioned *; since it contains, without any ambiguity, the first foundation of faith; viz. not only a certainty that God is, but likewise a certainty of what he is with respect to men: "He is their Rewarder and Benefactor."

This first certainty leads to another, which St. Paul calls an evidence, that is, demonstration. It is this:

God must necessarily reward, or make happy those who seek him.

We do not see that he does it in this life; the contrary seems to happen.

Therefore God designs to reward them in another.

Consequently there is a future state.

In this sense he again defines faith, "The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

The heroes of faith, whom he mentions in that place, relied upon this: they judged of uncertainty by what is certain; let us rather say, that the uncertainty as to another life, became to them a certainty, a demonstration.

The proof of this demonstration is the force, the power it had upon their minds. They acted consistently with it, which is a certain proof that they were fully persuaded of the truth of it. They sacrificed the advantages of the present life, to truth and justice; nay more, they suffered all the rigours of persecution, and sacrificed their very lives. And can it be thought that they did this, without having a certainty of an invisible world. Far from it; it is inconsistent with human nature, to give up certainty

* Hebr. xi.

for uncertainty. They continued steadfast, as seeing him who is invisible. They had a respect to the recompense of the reward * : they were obliged to chuse one of two things † ; they calculated, weighed ; compared the advantages and disadvantages on each side, and they made a right choice ‡.

That this is the true, justifying, and saving faith, no body, I think, will deny. If the testimony of that apostle did not prove it, the effects are a sufficient demonstration.

If we now consider again those definitions, or rather those expressions which have occasioned so many debates, we shall be persuaded that it has only been a dispute about words. In what class shall we rank those whom St. Paul extols here for their faith, which was probably of the right stamp ? Shall we place them in that of imputed righteousness, of faith without works ; or in that of personal righteousness, that unacceptable righteousness, which is before God as filthy rags ? had these plain upright men, who knew nothing but obedience, any notion of such a faith, of this imputation of the righteousness of another, by which we are absolved, and accounted righteous without being so ? Abel, the first martyr, and the first to whom the title of righteous was given, knew nothing of this imputation ; he was righteous in himself. He was not a martyr for opinions, but

* Hebr. xi.

† This relates to what has been advanced in letter twelfth, concerning the capacity of calculating, with which every man is endowed.

‡ These examples may be ranked in the same class with that of Abraham. Those who think otherwise, may set them aside, the truth of what we advance, being independent of them.

for righteousness. How do we know this? an apostle bears witness of it. He asks why Cain slew his brother? he intimates that it was because of the opposition between good and evil, between righteousness and unrighteousness *. It was, says he, because his works were evil, and his brother's works were good †. After this, can we be at a loss to perceive the ambiguity of these expressions? "Personal righteousness, righteousness of works, imputed righteousness, faith without works."

I am greatly mistaken, if the advocates for that system understand one another. It would be doing them an injustice to imagine that they would exclude a real, inherent righteousness, and that they would countenance a looseness of morals. What follows, will prove this.

After having laid down the doctrine of imputed righteousness, they do their utmost to prevent the bad effects it may have upon men. They frequently repeat, that notwithstanding this, we must endeavour to be holy, to practise justice, and beware of making Jesus Christ a minister of sin, that without holiness we cannot see God.

After this, as men would be in some danger of falling into the opinions of personal righteousness, they

* This false and unrighteous principle, which appeared so early in Cain, is the same which has since appeared in all persecutors. Jesus Christ leaves us no room to doubt of it, and the good principle which was found in our Saviour's true disciples who suffered persecution, is the same at bottom, with that which dwelt in the righteous Abel.

† This confirms what has been advanced, viz. that those works which tend to order, are put in opposition to general disorder.

again apply a remedy to prevent this evil. The chief point of faith, say they, is for us to put on the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and to renounce all personal righteousness.

The contradictions to be met with in this system, give them a great deal of work : this is what is called doing and undoing.

Here a remark occurs to me, which I think overthrows that system. If the doctrine of imputed righteousness, was essential to what is called enlivening faith, saving faith ; it would very naturally yield conclusions relating to practice ; there would be no occasion of warning men not to draw from thence consequences tending to a looseness of morals. This appears to me to be an objection that must greatly perplex the advocates for that system.

Let us allow one thing ; for we must do justice to every body. The advocates for the opposite system, have not refuted this, in a satisfactory manner : They have not been able to answer an objection which their antagonists have started to them, viz. that they consider good works as the cause of salvation ; and that this is making man the author of his own happiness, and depriving God of the glory which accrues to him from being so.

L E T T E R X I X .

The cause of man's salvation. Opposite systems. A supposition admitted on both sides. Whether substitution can take place.

S I R,

YOU justly observe that the difficulty is perplexing ; unless we can find some unexpected solution, I know not how we can remove it.

Let us first see upon what the question turns : it turns upon the means or cause of man's salvation. Salvation, say the advocates for the ancient system, could only be purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ ; whereas the modern divines affirm it to be the recompense of good actions.

These opposite propositions agree in one point : they both suppose that happiness must be bought, and consequently sold ; that God is the seller *, and that he does not give it, without being well and duly paid.

I put this question to myself, what could engage the Deity to sell to men that happiness for which he designed them ? could it be the same cause that

* This way of expressing one's self, is certainly harsh and shocking : but upon examination, we shall find that it is only the words that shock us. Here is a proof of it. The words payment, price, ransom, do not shock us : now these words necessarily suppose a seller and buyer : but the reason is, that the ear is more accustomed to the former words than to the latter.

makes men part with nothing *gratis*? what is that cause? it is their indigence, the need they have of making up, or supplying the want of what they give away. However that may be, every thing is bought and sold among men; because their indigence renders them all more or less interested.

Can we find this cause in the Deity? with what coin shall men pay him? can we suppose the Deity to be in the same case with those princes who not being able to draw money from their poor subjects, pay themselves with their personal services*. Has the Deity any occasion for labourers, officers, cup-bearers, or in a word, of that croud of domestics who serve as much for state as for use to great men?

Once more, wherewithal can we pay or satisfy the supreme Being? let us hear what our divines say upon this head†. They tell us, that the infinite Being, "could only be satisfied with sufferings of an infinite value." Let us consider this a little. "To be satisfied with sufferings," is what we can hardly conceive. Even men seldom require such satisfaction, except those who are animated with a spirit of cruelty or vengeance. All others, let them have but the least humanity, only inflict punishments, with a view to procure some advantage, either to themselves, or to the public.

Whichever way I consider this matter, I cannot conceive how the Deity can be paid, or satisfied by sufferings, and cannot be enough surprized how men have admitted of such a supposition for so many centuries: a supposition which would be injurious even

* What great men expend, they recover by the services which they receive; services much more useful to them, than the money we give for them.

† The modern divines.

to man, and would necessarily destroy the idea of sovereign perfection.

One thing will be granted me, viz. that a supposition which is laid down as a principle, ought to be grounded upon the most evident truths. But this supposition, far from being of such a kind, is grounded on nothing but a comparison *, and a very imperfect one : nay further, as it borrows certain figures, which give us no fixed or determinate idea ; it leads insensibly from one idea to another, which upon examination will be found very different from the former.

It is easy to prove this. The idea of substitution is applied to two sorts of things, one of which is, but the other cannot be susceptible of it. A man, for instance †, keeps a prisoner or a slave in irons, and consents to release him, for a certain sum ; or, if you will, upon condition that another shall become a slave in his room. This is very practicable ; and here substitution may be admitted without any difficulty ; the reason is obvious : for the person who keeps this man in prison, asks nothing more than money, or a slave ; accordingly it is indifferent to him who pays him the money, or who is the slave.

But with respect to offences committed, and punishments inflicted, substitution cannot take place, not even the substitution of one man for another. A man,

* There is no man who would be offended, if it was told him that he might pay or satisfy himself with the sufferings of another person.

† They have grounded themselves on the comparisons in which Jesus Christ speaks of debts, payment, etc. But they might likewise have built upon his comparing himself to a thief, to an unjust judge.

for example, has done me a personal injury, I require that he may be punished; if you substitute one in his room, this gives me no satisfaction. The reason is, that I can be induced to prosecute him only by one or other of these motives, justice or vengeance. It is easy to prove that neither of these can admit of a substitution: the thing is evident in itself. If it is through justice that we would inflict a punishment, the guilty alone must suffer it. If through a desire of vengeance, he alone must suffer, who is the object of it: substitute any other person in his room, and you immediately disarm us, let us be ever so much incensed*.

Now if it is evident, that substitution cannot take place, as a reparation for an offence, not even among men, it is still more evident that it cannot take place, with respect to the supreme Being, since no man can flatter himself with the hopes of deceiving him.

From hence it appears, that we may easily suffer ourselves to be dazzled by comparisons, which impose upon us, and which are not only imperfect, but likewise defective in the very foundation of them, and thus entirely change the state of the question. Let us not press this matter further upon the well-meaning advocates for this doctrine; let us spare them the trouble of seeing too distinctly what it implies.

But I forgot one thing which make a part of this system, and ought not to be suppressed. "Jesus Christ, say they, has satisfied the Deity, not only by sufferings, but likewise by a life of good works;

* It is an acknowledged truth, that the Deity is neither susceptible of anger, nor of vengeance. And if he was so, we have already proved, that vengeance itself cannot admit of a substitution.

“ this makes a part of imputed righteousness. Men,
 “ who by faith put on this righteousness, are ac-
 “ counted not only to have suffered what Jesus Christ
 “ has suffered, but also to have done the good acti-
 “ ons which he did.”

May I still venture to examine closely, what this supposition implies? I can hardly resolve to do it. For this purpose I should be obliged to enter into distinctions which would offend every man who reverences the Deity, and conceives him under the idea of a simple Being. This is evident: we must suppose the Deity to be capable of imagining what is not, and of being satisfied with this imaginary act *; that is, we must suppose falshood to be in the God of truth, an inconsistency in the simple Being †.

* There are certain things which have never been closely examined; when we undertake such an examination, we are surprized to see the tendency of them. They have been received without much difficulty; and it appears that they are inconsistent with the most simple and unalterable truths: truths, which taken by themselves, are acknowledged by all mankind. God is a simple Being, this is unaniously agreed to. He cannot therefore be inconsistent with himself, he is not susceptible of falshood, or of imagining what is not. Who will dare to deny this?

It is only in the orthodox doctrines that people take the liberty of supposing such a thing, but without any evil intention, and in other words. If men keep to words that are consecrated, they are safe. Let us do justice to the advocates for this doctrine, they have never thoroughly examined the matter. If this doctrine was new to them, they would look upon it as very injurious to the Deity, and their zeal would be kindled, and their indignation raised against the rash man who should dare to vent it.

† And is not this setting revealed and natural religion in opposition to one another, as has been observed. See letter fifth.

LETTER XX.

The sequel on the same subject. Whether men are able to purchase happiness. Difficulties removed.

S I R,

I AM not ignorant that there still remains a difficulty to be solved, viz. we must obviate the inconveniency which the orthodox divines find in the doctrine, “ which ascribes too much to man, makes “ him the author of his own happiness, destroys gratitude, and deprives the Creator of the glory which “ is solely due to him.”

This inconveniency, I own, seems to be considerable. Man, who is already so presumptuous and self-conceited, has no need of being furnished with new reasons to make him more so.

Can no way be found to remove this difficulty? perhaps we need only examine the subject more thoroughly. The first foundation of happiness is being. It likewise supposes two conditions: the first is the existence of a good, which can render the subject happy; the second, that the subject be endowed with faculties, which enable him to enjoy that happiness.

Now, I ask, of which of these three things can man believe that he is the author? is it of the being which he has received, or is it of the object of his happiness? he cannot be so extravagant as to suppose either. Is it then of the faculties with which he is endowed? but has he not received them, as he re-

ceived his being? and if God had thought fit not to endow him with them, would it have been in his power to procure them for himself?

Here the pretended inconveniency falls of itself to the ground; and it evidently appears, that men can no more believe that they are the authors of the happiness which they shall enjoy, than of the being which they have received. After this, how can a man be supposed to be in a condition to purchase that good for which they were made?

Another remark, which is no less striking than the former, is, that if the infinite Being can lose nothing, it costs him nothing to give; and if he can acquire nothing *, what price can he receive in exchange of what he gives?

This is undeniable, when considered in itself. The last subterfuge which people make use of, is to pretend, that men may be said to purchase happiness in a certain sense, viz. by the efforts which he makes to become virtuous †. They add, that if God no longer requires the sacrifices of beasts, as he did in former times, he requires sacrifices of another kind, and which cost more. He requires an absolute devotion to his service, the whole heart, good works of all kinds, and an homage, in short, which is a kind of tribute, that subjects owe to their sovereign. Now this is still purchasing happiness.

* To be incapable of acquiring any thing, does not denote a want of power, but a fulness, which is an essential attribute of the infinite Being. It is another of his attributes, that he can always give without losing any thing.

† It is true, that, in one sense, we might apply here the common maxim in the affairs of life; "No pleasure without pain." But that is only accidental, as will appear in the sequel.

There is only one thing that perplexes me. I would gladly know, whether God receives what you call tribute, as a good from which he reaps any advantage. If he does, I agree, that he sells to men that happiness, which he gives them a reason to expect; for he gives them one good, and they give him another: there is indeed no proportion between what he gives, and what he receives: but no matter; men pay with their personal services, and as much as they are capable of paying.

You are puzzled, I perceive, and you dare not maintain a tenet so opposite to the idea of the infinite Being. Renounce therefore once for all, the pretended necessity of paying the self-sufficient Being. And if you have a mind to see in a stronger light, the fallacy of this supposition, you need only try to connect this reasoning:

The infinite Being can receive no payment.

He requires of man an expensive obedience.

Therefore he requires it by way of payment.

The conclusion, as is evident, destroys the first proposition; and this reasoning confutes itself. Let us try to connect another, built upon the same principles.

God requires of men an expensive obedience.

The infinite Being can receive no payment.

Therefore he does not require that obedience by way of payment.

From this reasoning we may proceed to another, viz.

God made man for happiness.

It is an essential property of a wise Being never to depart from his end.

Therefore whatever God seems to require of men, concurs to this end, and leads them to happiness.

From hence it will follow, that what you call tribute, homage, devotion to his service, sacrifice, and whatever you include in the idea of good works, must all relate solely to man, and to procure his real good, as well for the present time, as for the future.

From hence it will likewise follow, that the happiness which God reserves for men, is purely gratuitous on his part, that they cannot deserve or purchase it * by any thing whatever.

This, methinks, is fully sufficient to remove those huge difficulties which set divines at variance. This solution ought to satisfy them, it reconciles both parties. The moderns could not come into this notion of imputed righteousness. They maintained, that God judges of every man, by what he is in himself. This has been laid down, and likewise granted to them without any difficulty.

The orthodox, through their zeal, were afraid, lest men should imagine, that they were the authors of their own happiness, that they purchased it by their virtues and good actions.

* In the efforts which they make to become virtuous, they have only a view to themselves; that they may be qualified to receive this gift.

We have demonstrated, that this payment cannot take place, and that happiness is a thing freely bestowed by the supreme Being. From whence then could such obstinate controversies proceed? was it only from a misconstruction? not altogether. What appears to me to be the most direct and immediate cause of it, is, the supposition which was admitted by both parties, upon which both went, and from which the most opposite consequences were deduced: the supposition, I say, of a happiness bought and sold; a supposition, which was so highly revered, that no body would venture to examine it thoroughly, in order to see what foundation it could have.

L E T T E R S

CONCERNING THE

R E L I G I O N

ESSENTIAL TO

M A N:

As it is Distinct from what is merely
an ACCESSION to it.

PART SECOND.

L B T E R S

R E L I G I O N

ESSENTIAL TO



As it is Delineated in this is merely
an Accession to it.

PART SECOND

ADVERTISEMENT.

Concerning the following LETTERS.

“ **T**HE only design of the preceeding letters,
 “ was to destroy two kinds of falshood, which
 “ are an obstacle in man to the establishment of
 “ truth.

“ One is the falshood of an infinite number of o-
 “ pinions, which disfigure religion. The other is
 “ the defect of a depraved taste, cheated by the
 “ lustre of what we call the goods of fortune :
 “ whence very many false judgments arise, as well
 “ concerning ourselves as others *.

“ In the following letters, we attack another kind
 “ of falshood, or, to speak more properly, another
 “ branch ; for the principle of it is essentially the
 “ same. I mean here that which introduces itself
 “ under a form of spirituality, clothes people with
 “ sentiments of devotion, with zeal for the glory of
 “ God, and with high and sublime motives, and
 “ which produces those amazing effects that look
 “ like a metamorphosis.

“ To attack this kind of falshood is a most delicate
 “ undertaking : it looks as if we had a design against
 “ goodness itself, and as if we meant to destroy all

* To this relate the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth letters.

“ the sentiments, motives, and good inclinations
 “ which lead towards God and religion.

“ It is no less true, however, that this kind of
 “ falshood is opposite to religion, (I mean, to the
 “ religion essential to man) as much as any other
 “ kind, if not perhaps more. The relish which
 “ men have for false lustre, pomp, and ridiculous
 “ vanity ; this relish, I say, though too general,
 “ yet scarcely finds an advocate. If people endeavor
 “ to palliate it, at least they do not launch
 “ forth into its praise, nor pretend to make it pass
 “ for a virtue. Here the case is different, though
 “ the principle upon which men act is very near the
 “ same *. But no matter for that : the imaginary
 “ finery with which they set themselves off in spiritual
 “ matters, far from being looked upon as false,
 “ is canonized, and passes for virtue ; for virtue too
 “ of the first rank.

“ The bad effects of this is not merely confined
 “ to the vanity, with which it inspires people : it
 “ goes so far with many, as to make them ignorant
 “ of their real disposition, and by feeding them with
 “ chimæra's, leads them to forget the vital part of
 “ religion.

“ The truth of the matter is, that men have a
 “ very limited capacity, and cannot bend their application
 “ two ways at the same time ; and what

* When men have renounced what is called the pomp
 and lustre of the world, they seek to make it up to themselves
 by a lustre of another kind. They are resolved, at any rate,
 to be decked out, not only in the eyes of others, but likewise
 in their own ; and for this reason do they call in to their
 assistance so many fine sentiments, and so many acts of
 virtue, which they very soon believe to be real.

“ will the case be, if they should happen to neglect the principal way? will it not be truly said, that they leave the substance to follow the shadow?

“ The thing is but too well confirmed, by the behaviour of a certain set of people. It is sufficiently known, that devout men by profession, spiritual men, as they are called, are not always the most equitable, either in their judgments or actions: that they are neither the most sincere, nor the most tractable persons in affairs of life. Just the contrary is laid to their charge. It is pretended, that there are no persons more sharp in pursuing their own interests, none more inflexible, more head-strong, and sometimes none more revengeful than they with respect to those, who have the misfortune to disoblige them *. These however are people who are wholly taken up in pious exercises, holy meditations, and fervent prayers.

“ How shall we reconcile these things? it is just what we have been saying. They are too much busied with these different avocations, to reflect seriously on the secret springs of their actions. These fervent extasies make too much noise; they take up too much room to leave any for such a delicate penetration; and perhaps we should not be mistaken, if we ventured here to affirm a kind of paradox, viz. that persons of this sort,

* Nothing would be more unjust, nor even more false, than to range all those who are called devout persons in the same class. There must be the same variety of characters among them, as there is among any other sort of people.

“ however concentric they may be, are nevertheless
 “ at a great distance from themselves.

“ It is to remedy, if possible, the like inconveni-
 “ encies, that the following letters are designed.
 “ The success, if it was to answer in some degree,
 “ would be advantageous in different respects, and
 “ to different sorts of people. We have even rea-
 “ son to think, that civil society would be the bet-
 “ ter for it ; since it is well known, that zeal, when
 “ raised to a certain pitch, occasions no small havoc
 “ there *.

“ I shall make another reflexion, viz. that every
 “ thing which is borrowed and imaginary, being ta-
 “ ken away, men will become sincere †, and more
 “ ingenuous towards one another. This reflexion
 “ leads me to one more.

“ We live in an age, in which people value
 “ themselves upon a certain taste, which consists
 “ in esteeming nothing but what is natural and
 “ easy, nothing but what is produced without
 “ pain. In consequence of this taste, they pro-
 “ fess an abhorrence for what is counterfeit,

* Without speaking of persecution, properly so cal-
 led, how rigid, positive, and even disdainful is the
 spirit that prevails among such as pass for very reli-
 gious people !

† It is not only such as are called devout persons,
 that we have in view. There are very few, who, in
 the little time and pains they bestow on religion, do
 not sometimes admit of these constrained and unnatural
 extasies, these high-flown sentiments, and these motives
 of command, of which we shall speak afterwards.
 What engages them to this, is a secret trouble, and
 a kind of restless anxiety about their state, which they
 study to mitigate as well as they can.

“ bombast or even borrowed. They cannot bear
 “ it in point of sentiments * : if they detect you
 “ in such a thing, it is enough to make you
 “ contemptible, let your merit be as great as you
 “ will in other respects.

“ To tell the truth, it is frequently in others
 “ only that we abhor what is false and borrowed.
 “ But no matter : this taste is still a kind of homage
 “ done to the most excellent and valuable thing in
 “ the world.

“ Does not this taste, which every one approves
 “ of in society, point out to us in a very strong
 “ manner, what man ought to be with respect to re-
 “ ligion ? it is here especially, that the borrowed,
 “ the bombast, or the counterfeit can never be cur-
 “ rent. I do not speak of grimaces. The ques-
 “ tion is not about hypocrites, or those persons
 “ who study to deceive and impose upon others.
 “ No ; we have here in view such people who de-
 “ ceive themselves ; but who do it without directly
 “ having a bad intention, or who at least are not a-
 “ ware of the pains they take to seem beautiful in
 “ their own eyes.

“ It would be doing no bad office to such per-
 “ sons †, the greatest part of whom are well-mean-

* Can such a judicious taste as this be forbidden in mat-
 ters of religion ? must religion be the sanctuary of falshood,
 and of such compound stuff as the world rejects, and bani-
 shes with contempt ?

† It would be even doing a remarkable piece of service
 to tender and scrupulous consciences, if we could rid them
 of those burthens which they think themselves obliged to
 bear. I mean, so many forced acts of virtue, and so many
 high-flown extasies. Such strains are violent and unnatural.

“ing in some degree, to invite them to come into
“this reasonable taste; which, if reasonable with
“respect to other men, is still more so, in what re-
“lates to God and ourselves *.”

and for that very reason repugnant to simplicity and integrity.

* The thing is pretty clear. What shall we get by dissembling with God? and wherein profit ourselves by substituting what is borrowed in the place of a real thing that we want? will not every thing that is only false coin, come sooner or later to be known for what it is?

L E T T E R S

Concerning the RELIGION essential
to MAN, as it is distinct from that
which is merely an Accession to it.

L E T T E R XXI.

False ideas of that by which God is honoured.

S I R,

WHAT you say is true ; the comparison
we make on all occasions between the
supreme Being and those men we call so-
vereigns, leads us into numberless mistakes.

Christians are accustomed from their infancy to
consider religion as something by which God is ho-
noured : so early do they fancy to themselves, that
when they pray to him, or praise him, he is much
obliged to them for it ; and that by giving alms and
doing what we call good works, they honestly pur-
chase heaven. If afterwards they do not think so
grossly, this opinion subsists in the main, though
perhaps so secretly, that they themselves are not
aware of it.

Our common discourse receives some tincture from
this opinion ; we talk of glorifying God, and paying

him the homage that is due, as of a thing which is very advantageous to him : we insinuate, that he must be highly offended, not to say affronted, by those who refuse to pay him that homage.

The usual distinction between what we owe to God, and what we owe to ourselves, gives many people room to make separate articles of them. They give him his portion, if we may use the word ; they set apart a certain time for worshipping him ; in short, they render unto God what is his due, he ought to be satisfied.

It is true, that it would be hard to convince many people, that this part of religion, which seems only to relate to God, does, like all the rest, tend solely to the advantage of man. They will readily conceive, that our duty towards our neighbour, and our duty towards ourselves, are things in which our real interest is concerned. But as to what we call our duty towards God, they range it under a different class. Nevertheless, it would not be a hard matter to prove to them, that this same duty, as well as the others, tends solely to the advantage of man.

Those, who in this respect have somewhat of a better way of thinking than others, will allow the thing to be true, though perhaps, without sufficiently perceiving the full extent of it ; for which cause their reasonings are but partly consistent.

They can say to themselves, that a certain portion of time dedicated to divine worship is not enough, that God is not satisfied with forms and ceremonies, much less with grimace ; and that he requires the homage of the heart, not that of the lips. We cannot but agree to this ; and if the bulk of mankind was of the same way of thinking, there would be much less error in the world.

I do not know however, if these men do not secretly imagine, that they do God some service, and advance his glory; especially when they are employed about the conversion of their neighbour. This appears by their discourse. They have, say they, the glory of God in their view, they want to make converts to him, they would wish to see that the number of his faithful servants was infinitely increased, and that every mouth would sound forth his praises.

Nothing surely can be more noble than this design; and if there be any defect therein, it is perhaps this, that there is something too noble, not in the design, but in the motives which are pretended. For properly speaking, it is not for the good of mankind, that people of this character exert themselves. Every thing that merely relates to man, is too low for them; they have God himself in view, his glory, his interest, and the increase of his dominion*; it is to this end, that they are ready to sacrifice even their eternal salvation. It is here, that disinterested love takes place; but it might carry us too far, and to use the expression, lead us out of our depth. Let

* To wish that the number of good men may increase, and to contribute thereto as much as we can, is a thing extremely reasonable. It would at once be doing service to ourselves and others: for it is certain, that if good men made the greatest number, society in general would change its appearance, and every one in particular would be a gainer thereby. It is not therefore such a design that we find fault with; it is the sublime, and perhaps imaginary, motives of labouring for God, and having his interest in view. People are not content with having merely served mankind, they want to have the satisfaction of saying to themselves, that they have done service to God himself.

us return to a subject which is situated more within our reach.

I think then it were to be wished, that such well-meaning people would not pretend to such exalted motives, which perhaps a man cannot really have, because they are ill-grounded; and for that very reason can neither be kept up, nor have any influence upon his conduct. I add, it is to be feared, that imaginary motives, however noble you suppose them to be, may transport a man from his proper situation, and beget a fallshood in his ideas.

In effect, when I say to myself, that I contribute towards the advancement of God's glory, I secretly imagine, that I am useful to him, and that I do him great service. The consequence is very natural. It is true, we take care not to express the thing in such gross terms: but at bottom, this is the language of our thoughts.

The other inconveniency which I find in the affair, is, that such motives cannot be kept up; as experience shews when they come to the trial. Let us suppose, that the question is about making some sacrifice to truth or equity, and that in order to induce me to make it, I say to myself, that such a thing is due to the glory of God, and that his interest requires it. In that case, a certain sentiment of truth whispers to me, that God has no need of that glory, which I endeavour to procure to him, and that his interest has no dependence upon me. If I have no other motive, I am much afraid that this pretended interest of the glory of God will presently disappear: so true it is, that motives which are far-fetched, and too much above human nature, have no manner of efficacy.

Let us say something more. Can motives which have no foundation either in the nature of God *, or in that of man †, have any reality in them? on what shall we ground them?

L E T T E R XXII.

Of Motives. The nature of motives. Of devotion.

S I R,

LET us fairly own it: our method of ranging the motives, which we present to men in order to induce them to do good, plainly shews, that we are ill-acquainted with the nature of them.

We fancy, that the great number of these motives will be of great weight, and that they will strengthen one another. We do not fail to determine, which of these motives ought to be the first in order. If that of our interest can come in for any share, it must only be in subordination to the rest.

That of the glory of God must be the first: that of gratitude the next; and that of our own interest the

* It is the nature of an infinite Being to be freely beneficent; and to require nothing for himself. This being supposed, on what shall we ground the glory which God expects to draw from the services of men?

† It is the nature of an indigent being to wish necessarily for his own advantage, and to aim at it directly. This being supposed, where shall we find in him this desire of procuring glory to a Being infinitely glorious, of doing service to a Being who is all-sufficient, and of thinking only in the last place upon himself, who is in want of every thing.

last : for it is agreed, that without this, the former two would not be sufficient.

I examine how I shall do to range these motives in my head. Nothing certainly is more easy, and it requires but a small share of memory to retain them. But are motives under the jurisdiction of the memory : this is what I doubt, and the least degree of attention will convince us that they are not.

I take motives to be under the jurisdiction of the will : what we call motive, when rightly understood, is no more than what moves us, and inclines us towards a certain end. Hence we infer, that men cannot be moved by motives, which are independent of one another, and of a different nature ; and that all particular motives relate to a single one, which is as it were the axis upon which the rest turn.

It would be ridiculous to say to a man, do such a thing, from such and such a motive. All the effect which that can have, will be to fill his imagination or memory with this pretended motive ; whilst the true, the real motive, that determines him, subsists at bottom *, and disguises itself under the shape of the other. What will be the consequence ? such a man will applaud himself for being influenced by such

* An example will explain this. Suppose a magistrate who can only be affected with what concerns his own interest : you make proposals to him, which tend to his advantage, and which at the same time seem beneficial to the public : you tell him, that the love of the public good obliges him to hearken to them. This man greedily lays hold upon this opportunity of serving his country ; he says within himself, that he ought to have nothing else in view but the public interest ; he orders himself to act from this motive, and to entertain sentiments that are noble and worthy of the post he fills.

noble motives, and will ever afterwards give more and more into that groundless opinion.

The defect in sublime moral sentiments, as well as in the greatest part of the maxims of devotion is that, generally speaking, they are wholly built in the air. We suppose in them a thing which is not, and are thereby led to imaginary notions, and to efforts entirely inconsistent with the nature of man.

One says to me, do this action from the principle of the love of God. But what if I have not this love? it must be had. Where is it to be bought? is it a purchase that I can make to-morrow or next day? but the action is pressing, and admits of no delay. What I will do is this; I will tell myself, that I ought to do it from the motive of the love of God, and that I should be very miserable, if I had any thing else in view*. This is enough, and I have reason to be satisfied with myself.

I have been long at variance with such a man, I entertain an ill will and an aversion to him; certain views of interest induce me to be reconciled in appearance. I am told, that I ought to do it from a principle of charity: we "must love our neighbour as ourselves." I perceive, that what made me consent to a reconciliation, was nothing a-kin to this love. No matter for that: I represent to myself, that I ought to love my neighbour, was he my greatest enemy, that the gospel commands me to do so. Hereupon am I quite inspired with this brotherly love: I admire the progress that christianity makes in me†.

* A way of speaking, which is common enough with many people.

† The moral refinements upon motives, ought not to be proposed by way of precepts. They would be very useful

In how many other respects do we suppose ourselves to have what we want, and take what is only imaginary to be real !

What we call devotion, is susceptible of this. All those successive transports which appear each in its turn, owe a great deal * to imagination. We feel whatever we please, sorrow, joy, love, gratitude, etc. Entirely weaned from every thing else, we have only the glory of God for our end, and his will for our rule.

What strange metamorphoses are produced by this thing called devotion ! I omit a great many kinds of them, which it would be easy to particularize. During these happy moments, an unjust man puts on sentiments of equity ; a severe man, sentiments of humanity ; a vain and pompous man, sentiments of humility, and of contempt for the world †.

if they were only designed to give people an opportunity of examining themselves upon these motives, and of perceiving what is the great spring of action. Such inward reflections, far from leading us to what is false and deceitful, would be proper to secure us against it. But to tell a man who is already resolved upon such or such an action, that he must do it from such or such a motive ; this only gives him an opportunity of patching other motives to that which has singly determined him. They are superfluous, and only serve to give him a false lustre.

* Not to say all.

† Many people would not doubt but that such metamorphoses may happen. They would ask perhaps, whether it is then an unprofitable thing to bestow any reflection upon these duties. That is not what I mean. I would give every thing its own name. What is only slight and transitory, I would call reflections, and not sentiments. If these reflections induced me to act in a consistent manner, I would call them good reflections. If they produced no effect, I would call them vain and deceitful. But as for

But hold ! sentiments put on ! this phrase seems to imply a contradiction. Is it in a man's power to assume what sentiments he pleases ? no ; but he may imagine them ; and these imagined, not to say imaginary sentiments, I call put on ; because we put on the appearance of them, and afterwards take it for the reality.

What proves them to be merely borrowed, is, that we are presently stript of them. The moment that the imagination, fatigued with the great effort it has made, grows cool and composed, all these fine sentiments are gone, and the contrary succeed in their place *. It is then that we lament the loss of the good dispositions which we had acquired. We must even recover them again by efforts of the same kind, and afterwards see ourselves in the like manner unavoidably stript of them.

It is in these efforts that many people make their christianity to consist. They do not cease withal to complain of their lukewarmness ; they have neither that zeal nor fervency which they ought to have, they are sometimes inattentive ; and, which is their greatest misfortune, they have a bad memory, they cannot retain the fine things which they read or

sentiments, I would not flatter myself with having them, till a long and constant experience had convinced me that they were real.

* This is experienced in seasons of high devotion. The very next day, we find that we are no longer the same men which we believed ourselves to be the day before. Our deadened passions revive with fresh vigour, and the more expence we have been at in religious transports, the more empty do we find ourselves on that account.

hear †. You see here persons of a very blameless character, and who, besides, have a great deal of humility. We cannot dispute this, since it appears so strong in their discourse.

There is, nevertheless, a doubt which arises in my mind. I think it possible, that the great application which a devotion of this kind requires, may with them supply the room of every thing else; and that while they carefully attend to those borrowed sentiments, upon which they set a great value, the study of themselves is what they neglect most. In that case, where shall we rank this devotion and humility?

There is one thing very singular in their case, viz. that however devout and humble they may be, they must take care never to believe it; they would cease to be so, the moment they should come to find it out †.

If an imaginary and contradictory effort can deserve the name of virtue, I confess my ignorance. I had

* This kind of devotion is susceptible of great falshood. People mistake the value of things in it. They torment themselves about what is not in their power, and oftentimes they neglect what deserved their greatest attention. Let us, however, make a distinction here. It is possible that well-meaning, and at bottom very valuable people, may in some respects find themselves in the same situation. But we have reason to presume that their own experience will, sooner or later, put them out of conceit with a course which is equally fruitless and perplexing.

† Nothing can prove better than this contrast, how false the idea is which we commonly have of devotion and humility. Can a man who is six foot high, persuade himself that he is no more than four, and will he cease to be what he is, the moment he comes to perceive it?

hitherto believed that all real virtue must have truth for its foundation †.

L E T T E R XXIII.

Upon the same subject. A principle recalled. The use of the imagination. A principle recalled. Sentiments are of a passive nature. The use of free faculties.

S I R,

YOU are afraid, lest in attacking what is false in devotion, I should insensibly strike at what is real. You add, that since man is capable of sentiments, the noblest use he can make of them, is to direct them towards God and religion.

That man is capable of sentiments, I know. I have not endeavoured to strip him of those which he has, but only to undeceive him as to those which he pretends to have, or which he borrows from imagination. I take no real good from him, all I aim at, is to rescue him from false appearances.

I am of opinion, that sentiments are as little in our power as motives ; and that whenever we command ourselves ‡ to have such a sentiment, or such

† Every thing that is real subsists, whether the person in whom it subsists, observes it or not : but what distinguishes the real from the false, is, that the false occasions pride, whereas real virtue is safe from it. This will appear in the sequel.

‡ What ought to discover the nature of such sentiments to us, is the necessity we lie under of working ourselves up to them. When sentiments are real, they rise of their

a motive, we only make an imaginary, not to say, a deceitful effort. I am much inclin'd to believe, that such things as do not spring up in man as it were naturally ‡, can have no reality in them, and that they do not appertain to religion, of which at most they are only the shadow or fantom.

We have observed, more than once, that the religion essential to man ought to be conformable to his nature, and exercise his different faculties in a manner suitable to the end for which they were given him. Now it is entirely contrary to his nature to love or believe upon command, or to borrow his sentiments from imagination.

own accord, and we have no occasion to call them, or to work them up, as the phrase is.

To tell a person that we work ourselves up to love him by all imaginary reflections, would be giving him great reason to suspect us of indifference. If we should tell him, that we work ourselves up to the joy we have in seeing him again, or to the grief that his absence will occasion, every one perceives that such a way of talking would be ill calculated to persuade him.

The truth is, that though men often impose upon themselves in matters of sentiment, there is no subject in which they are more ready to do so, than in that of religion.

‡ If you object to this, that goodness does not spring up naturally in corrupt man: I answer, that the question here, is not to determine what is the principle of goodness, but to describe the manner in which it is produced and discovered. In this respect you will easily grant me, that it must become, as it were, natural to man, and resemble those sentiments with which nature inspires an ingenuous child for his father: sentiments which spring up of themselves from the bottom of his heart, and which he has no occasion to force.

It is likewise a maxim adapted by divines, that "virtues must be naturalized in man."

The business of imagination, is to paint things †; sentiments are not its province. It can only represent or counterfeit them.

Man believes nothing but what he finds palpable and evident; he loves nothing but what he finds amiable or pleasing; he hates nothing but what he finds hateful ‡. His joy or sadness have only a relation to one or other of these things. To bid him either rejoice or be sad, is an idle command. Desire and fear are of the same nature.

There is room here for an useful remark, viz. that every thing we call sentiment, is of a passive nature, and that it necessarily receives the impression of objects; it is not in the power of man to hinder this, and it is only by indirect means, that he can contribute to make this impression more or less strong.

† Experience proves this. Imagination paints or brings back to us whatever we please it should represent. Have we felt in time past either pleasures or afflictions of an extraordinary kind, it paints both to us, one after another, almost in as lively a manner, as if they were actually present, and sometimes so as to make us shed tears. This is likewise no more than what happens every day in the play-house. The imagination of the actor produces its effect, as well upon himself as upon the spectators. All are moved, all enter more or less into the passion, according as their imagination is more or less struck.

‡ This is so true, that as soon as any thing strikes us by its evidence, we believe it before we say to ourselves, that we ought so to do. The moment that an object appears amiable to us, we begin to feel an inclination or liking to the same, before we say to ourselves, that we ought to love it. As soon as any object is displeasing, or makes a painful impression upon us, we begin to feel a sort of dislike or aversion to it, before we say to ourselves, that it deserves our hatred.

For this purpose is he endowed with free faculties. If he wanted these, the others would only serve to make him very miserable *, he would be the sport of a thousand inevitable impressions. It appears to me then, that if man is endowed with faculties of a different nature, some passive, others free, it is not to the former that we must give precepts †. They can only be directed to the latter, to that principle in man by which he can say, "I will such a thing, I consent to it."

To render the thing less abstracted, I will say, that if man could consider things in their true light, if every obstruction that serves to disguise them was removed, he would necessarily set a right value upon them, he would necessarily love good and hate evil; all his inclinations would of course lead him to follow one, and fly from the other.

You will say, that the difficult point is to arrive there. I allow it. But not so many things are necessary as we imagine; one alone, if rightly understood and properly applied, would be sufficient to do all. This single thing is sincerity, which is the only

* An example will explain this. Let a man be exposed to fire or ice, they necessarily make an impression upon him. To bid him not to feel it, would be ridiculous. It is only by turning away from the objects, that he can avoid this impression; and it is by the use of his free faculties, discernment, and choice, that he has it in his power to make this sensibility the cause of his preservation.

† For passive faculties to be capable of receiving precepts, it would be necessary that they should depend directly upon the will. But, as we observed before, this is not the case. If it was, then every man would have it in his power to say, *I have a mind to believe, I believe; I have a mind to love, I love; I have a mind to be merry, I am so.*

thing that a man hath in his power ; because it depends upon the will, and it is upon the will alone, that he has a direct influence.

L E T T E R XXIV.

Sincerity the principle of every moral good.

S I R,

IF it is true, say you, that sincerity is the only thing which can be required of men, what will become of all the precepts of the gospel, the volumes of morality, the treatises of devotion *, and all the long catalogue of virtues, duties, motives, etc. Have a little patience, I beseech you, and suffer me to ask you one question. When you plant a fruit-tree, do you not promise to yourself, that in a few years it will give you both shade and fruit ? at the same time you only plant a bare stem, I see not the least appearance of that bushy top which you reckon upon. You answer me, that you are in no pain about it, that this stem, when it once takes root, contains in itself the principle of growth which you expect. I answer you, in my turn, that the will is in man, the moral principle, or the root of all his actions ; and that all the sentiments, all the virtues essential to his nature, spring up insensibly, and as it were naturally from the

* Perhaps in these volumes and treatises, there would be a good many things to be curtailed, if the question was only about the religion essential to man. We shall see however, that this simple course which we take, excludes no real effect.

principle of sincerity *, or uprightness which the will may have adopted.

A man, to whom you propose divers precepts, and those of a very different nature, is greatly at a loss as to what course he should take, and with which of them he should begin. He ranges them in his head, and it is a difficult matter for him not to let some one escape him. He takes notice besides, that the observation of one frequently turns to the prejudice of another ; he does not know how to reconcile all ; his attention is wearied out ; and he at length conceives an aversion to religion, as to a thing impracticable ; or if he adheres to it still, it is in opinion only.

Let us suppose a man who knows but one thing, and knows it well : if that thing is of such a nature as to lead him to these others, I ask whether such a man would not take the shortest and nearest way ?

* It is negatively speaking, that sincerity can produce this effect : the passive faculties require nothing more. The business is not to plant, but to remove every obstruction that may intercept the object, or blunt the sentiment. When a man is once restored to the free use of all his senses, when every foreign obstacle is taken out of his way, he is capable of seeing, feeling, and discerning every thing round him, and of chusing accordingly : to this point should we bring a man with respect to morality.

It is well known, that a person who endeavours to take hold of too many things at one time, runs the risk of missing all. Nature, in all her productions, seems to point this out to us. The plants which spread at top, have a kind of center in which they are reunited, they present a stalk to us which we can easily take hold of.

The common proverb, *To take a thing by the right end*, is not without a sensible meaning.

L E T T E R. XXV.

The exercise of sincerity.

S I R,

L E T us suppose a man to have sincerity, to what will it directly lead him ?

I am apt to think, that his first task-will be, not to build but to demolish ; not to seek what is beautiful, in order to deck himself therewith, but to strive against what is evil *. This will no doubt be a heavy task, and he will find abundance of work cut out for him. The faculty of discerning, and that of chusing †, will here have an opportunity of exerting themselves. His study will be strictly to examine every thing that shall occur to him, with respect to what is good or evil, carefully to observe all his dispositions and inclinations, in order to prevent every vicious effect, to distinguish his true motives, and to suspend his judgment concerning what is false or unjust. If to this study we add, that of acting consistently with his knowlege, we shall have some idea of the exercise of sincerity.

There is great reason to presume, that this exercise, if it is constantly kept up, will carry us still farther. It will serve insensibly to strip the understand-

*. Falshood and injustice.

† These are the free and active faculties, which we have distinguished from the passive. It is only by the exercise of the former, that a man can get rid of the obstacles that stop him.

ing of what is mere prejudice, and to refine the taste * and discernment; which growing delicate, with respect to what is good or evil, will not easily take one for the other.

As a relish for what is truly good gathers strength, hurtful or dangerous objects will lose the false charms which rendered them seducing †; we shall begin to see them in their natural shape. On the other hand, the objects of the understanding, almighty truth, to which we had no liking nor inclination before, will begin to be discovered and relished: it will appear beautiful to us, and in that case shall we need any command to make us love it ‡?

We have already observed, and must again repeat it: men are so made, that they would necessarily

* We talk of a depraved taste, and add, that it is necessary to refine it; but this can only be brought about by insensible and indirect means. The reason is, because the taste is a passive faculty. In vain would the will command it in a direct manner to find that sweet which appears to it bitter. In this case, a man perceives, that in order to bring such a thing about, there are distant measures to be taken, that we must go to the root of the distemper, and attack it by its contraries. The case is the same, with respect to morality. Take a man wholly abandoned to sensual pleasures, and bid him relish the study of wisdom and exercise of virtue; alas! what can be more insipid or loathsome to him? it is here, especially, that distant, indirect, and consequently long-winded courses are absolutely necessary; and it is precisely a course of this nature, which we here point at.

† This gradation is quite natural. In proportion as the taste refines, it grows delicate; and the more delicacy it acquires, the less easily it is dazzled with what has only the appearance of good.

‡ This is a very emphatical question, it suggests more than it expresses.

love what is truly good, if they considered it as such; and necessarily hate evil, if it did not appear to them under a disguise. It is then to no purpose, that we exhort and solicit them to prefer one to the other, and that we strive to raise in them the sentiments of love and aversion, which one and the other deserve *. This direct way of raising sentiments, will only tend to counterfeit them; it is too much contrary to the laws of nature †.

Shall I tell you an idea that strikes me, and which no doubt will appear to you extraordinary? it is this, I think a man ought to begin with loving himself, and loving himself as he ought, before he pretends to love God: without the former, he will be incapable of the latter. I prove it thus:

Love, as we observed before, is not to be commanded. An object, in order to be loved, must be of such a nature, as to make an impression upon the person who is to love it; and who, before he can receive this impression, must get clear of all the obstacles that are capable of intercepting the object. If

* We here point at the sentiments of devotion, by which we express to God our love of him, and hatred of vice: it is what divines call acts of contrition.

† Nature is slow in her productions, she operates in a way that is insensible and imperceptible. The first labour she requires is, that of grubbing, and tearing up by the root what is bad. When that is done, the seeds which she contains will gradually spring up, and come to maturity in their due season. All the industry of which we are capable, cannot oblige her to quicken the pace; or if we sometimes succeed in this by the help of art, it is forcing nature, and we thereby destroy her in the bud. This is a pretty lively emblem of what men do in morality, and especially in devotion: they aim at a metamorphosis, they force nature and destroy her by that means.

the Deity, who is the source of all goodness and beauty, makes so small an impression upon our hearts and minds, I repeat it once more, it is because we have our sight in a manner obstructed by an infinite number of obstacles. Some of them flow from prejudice, others from the will, and others from the irregular inclinations, which we are resolved to gratify.

A man must then bestow labour, and perhaps a good deal of time upon himself, before he can be capable of loving a good, which these different obstacles intercept. He must be able to remove some of these *, and to surmount others. The love of himself, when rightly understood, is the only motive which can engage him to do this. For to give him here the love of God for a motive, would be making him set out with what he only finds at the end of his journey.

“ But hold ! say you. While this man is hard at
 “ work upon himself, and labouring to remove the
 “ different obstacles which you speak of ; during all
 “ that interval of time, which perhaps may be a
 “ very long one, he would only love himself, he
 “ would not love God † ! Can any thing be more
 “ absurd ? ”

* To remove prejudice, and to surmount his irregular inclinations.

† That is, to speak in plainer terms, this man may pass a long space of time, without flattering himself that he loves God. But if it is true, that this man, while employed about himself, is taking an indirect course towards being capable of knowing and loving the true good ; he can lose nothing there but the false lustre with which he decked himself, by fancying that he loved God, when he only loved himself, and that too in an improper manner.

I answer, it is true, that he would still be in that low situation ; but he would at least have the advantage of treading upon sure ground ; he would know exactly where he is, and be able to make a right judgment of his proceedings ; that is, he would know, that he is at work for himself, and he would not think that either God or men were obliged to him for it *.

You must allow, that if such a man is not arrived at the sublime, he is at least above the false ; he knows himself for what he is, and, which is another advantage, he does not call the idea which he has of himself by the name of humility †. But how shall we consent, say you, that this man should pass part of his life without loving God ? I answer, how do you consent, that a new-born child should pass fifteen or eighteen years before he comes to be a man ‡ ?

Let us confess the truth ; there is nothing more fantastical than the opinion which several people form concerning a pretended chain of virtues, which are acquired one does not know how. They are essential, consequently we must have them. We need

* Of how many false notions would devout people be cured, if they could bring themselves to consider things in this light !

† One of the inconveniencies which attend this kind of humility, is that it draws advantage from the distemper itself, and changes it into a pretended virtue ; as thus. A man begins to see into his vices or faults ; he does not stop there : he flatters himself that he is humble, applauds himself thereupon, and presently comes to imagine, that his discovering so many faults in himself is all owing to his humility.

‡ If we should not consent to this, the child would still require the same time to grow up.

only say so to ourselves, and by virtue of saying so, we have them. The business afterwards is not to acquire them, we have no more to do but to put them in practice *.

Where shall we find the cause of such a gross mistake? in the pain which men feel upon seeing themselves in disorder †. They cannot bear the sight; and before they could acquire every thing they want, they would be obliged to see themselves a great while in that condition. To shorten the work, imagination comes to their assistance, and furnishes them with what we call acts of virtue, faith, repentance, love, hope, etc. It is a strong proof, that they have the things themselves, since they do the acts which proceed from them. Besides, they are touched, pierced to the soul, and melted ‡. What can be more edifying! if it is true, however, as we have reason to presume it is, that an edifice

* Imagination takes the burthen of this exercise upon itself.

† However fond men are of beauty and perfection, they are forced to see several things which nearly concern them, continue long in a shapeless disorder, and to bear that these things should be rectified very slowly. I say, they must bear with this, because they cannot supply the place of reality, by the help of their imagination.

A man who pulls down a house, with a design to rebuild it, lays his account that for some time he will have nothing before his eyes but a confused heap of rubbish; he even expects, that when it is a building, it will present nothing beautiful or charming to the sight. It would be a much speedier work to draw it upon paper, or to make one of pasteboard.

‡ There is nothing more equivocal than this sensibility, these devout meltings. Such fervent transports are generally very mechanical, and are not at all inconsistent with the most corrupt principles.

built in a day, is only a painted building, what will the case be? must not error and deceit at length give place to truth?

This being supposed, I return to what I said before. The first, the great task of men, I say of sincere men, will be to consent to see every thing in its natural shape *, their business will be to remove every thing that may serve to disguise objects from them, every thing in short that may lead them into mistakes.

L E T T E R XXVI.

Of disinterested love. Whether we can love God in a disinterested manner. Whether we ought to love God more than ourselves. Conclusion.

S I R,

YOU engage me in a digression, from which I would willingly be excused. The subject of disinterested love is so far above me, that I dare not promise to give you a satisfactory account of it.

I call it a digression, because I take it to be very foreign to the spirit and end of these letters. We have proposed hitherto to walk even with the ground, as the phrase is, and now the question is to mount into a higher region. This is a thing which I am not at all used to. All that I can do, is to set one foot before another, for the secret of flying is wholly

* To see every thing in its natural shape, is all that is necessary to make us capable of setting a proper value upon every thing, and consequently of becoming judicious; nay more, of becoming equitable.

unknown to me ; and I confess, that I often envy those little creatures, which in a moment transport themselves to places at which we men cannot arrive, without making long journeys.

I have frequently wondered, that learned men, as they have been called, should have entered into any controversy upon this head. I do not pretend to tax as chimerical the experience which good men say they have of it ; but I do not know, whether they have not erred in making this experience serve as a rule for other people.

To give laws concerning love, is, in my opinion, a superfluous undertaking. The advocates for disinterested love, whatever volumes they may have writ, have not, methinks, greatly succeeded. There is a beauty in this notion of disinterestedness, something that raises our admiration : but the finest reasonings do not inspire us with it ; and the saying to ourselves, that we must have it, is not sufficient to make us have it actually. There was not much danger then of its making too great a progress, and we might have saved ourselves the trouble of attacking it.

If it is said, that there was danger, lest men should imagine, that they were bound to impossibilities, and on that account cast off all religion ; I grant, that it would be necessary to guard against this inconvenience : and if it has not yet been done in a satisfactory manner, the reason is, because the distinctions, which are made upon the motives of love, are easily couched in writing ; but the heart does not so readily admit of them. It goes on smoothly towards the end in view, and cannot endure to be clogged.

It appears to me then, that it would be better on this subject, to consider what is possible, than what is

extremely fine ; what actually is, than what ought to be.

All men ought to love God, as soon as they come to know themselves ; and they ought to do so, not for his sake, to whom their love is of small service, but for their own sake, to whom it would prove infinitely beneficial, because the order of their nature requires them to love and esteem every kind of good, in proportion to its worth and excellence. But are men placed in this situation ? is there not an immense distance between the disorder, in which they actually are, and that order, which ought alone to regulate both their esteem and love ? it would be necessary then, I say it once more, to suppose men such as they really are.

What are the maxims in dispute ?

Whether we can love God in a disinterested manner ?

Whether it is sufficient to love God for the sake of the reward ?

Whether we can love God more than ourselves ?

The first proposition is perhaps neither absolutely true, nor entirely false. In a certain respect I would deny it, in others not.

To come to the point, I shall not scruple to affirm, that the relation between an infinite Being and one that is indigent and limited, cannot be disinterested on the part of the latter. I say more, it ought not to be so : since it is the design of the Creator, that man should be always receiving, without having it in his power to make a return. This however, is no argument, that the supreme perfection, when it is manifested to the understanding, may not have essentially wherewithal to make itself loved, setting every

motive of interest aside. A familiar example will make the thing evident.

Let us suppose a relation between a poor man and one that is rich and generous. This relation cannot be disinterested on the poor man's side ; with regard to him, it would only terminate in receiving favours. It is very possible however, that this rich man may have personal qualities, that would procure him the esteem and attachment of the poor man, even if the latter had no interest in view. These are two things which are very consistent with one another.

The next question asked is, *Whether it is sufficient to love God for the sake of the reward* * ?

This phrase, *whether it is sufficient*, seems to me to have a doubtful meaning ; and I do not see to what it can relate, unless it be to shew the lowest price at which we may purchase heaven. It is to this no doubt that other questions of the same kind do likewise relate. - *Is it sufficient to do this or that* ? such questions at bottom have no signification at all ; they are parallel to others, which, in the affairs of life, would be thought extremely ridiculous.

Is it sufficient to lay the first stone of a building ? or, *Is it sufficient to know the names of the letters of the alphabet ?*

Do you ask, whether the first of these things is sufficient to build a whole house, and whether the

* The meaning of this question, when rightly considered, will appear to be this, *Is it sufficient to love the reward without loving God ?* To prove it, we need only express the thing in grosser terms, and say : *We will love God, to the end that he may reward us.* There is no doubt, but that, while we are in such a disposition as this, the reward is the only object that we actually love, the love of God is still to come.

latter is sufficient to make one read well? it would be madness to suppose such a thing. Do you ask, whether this is not a sufficient beginning in each of these respects? that must be your meaning. But why should you ask such a needless question? do you doubt that every thing must not have a beginning, and that this beginning is not sufficient, when considered only as a beginning *? To express the thing better, the beginning can only be sufficient with relation to the place it ought to fill; it supposes a continuation that may lead to perfection.

Hence I conclude, that to love the reward, or happiness, ought to be sufficient, when a man is not capable of any thing better; but it cannot be sufficient to reinstate him in the order, which constitutes both his perfection and happiness.

There would be more sense in this proposition, if we talked of obeying God for the sake of the reward; the meaning of which would plainly be, that we love the reward, and that in order to obtain it, we would resolve to do a great many things. But to talk of loving God for the sake of the reward, is a mere contradiction; for we allow, that the reward is the end in view, and consequently the thing we love.

A moment's attention will convince us, that the heart is not of a nature to be compelled to love one thing with a design to obtain another; the latter would be the end, and the former only the means.

* There is certainly a time when man is only capable of loving himself, and aiming at his own happiness, and he must then be allowed not to have any higher motives; otherwise we should suppose God to be unjust, since he would require an impossibility.

Now, properly speaking, we love but one thing, viz. the thing at which we aim.

We are now come to the third proposition : *Ought we to love God more than ourselves*, or rather, *is it possible for us to do so?* for I always consider the possibility of a thing in the first place. There is much room for debate here.

Some will decide the thing by the great commandment, etc. If we must love our neighbours as ourselves, it is indisputable that we must love God more than ourselves. Others will deny the possibility of it. They will say, that since men love God only for their own sake, they cannot love him more than themselves. The former will reply, that this supposition destroys all love of God, since a thing which is loved merely for the sake of another, is only loved as the way that leads us to the place where we have a mind to go.

I doubt, if they go this way to work, they will never agree ; and the reason perhaps is, because they have never thoroughly examined the nature of love.

Methinks we might make a distinction here, which would set the thing in a clear light, and perhaps put an end to the dispute. Let us distinguish between the love which a man bears to himself, and that which he may conceive for God. The difference I find between them is, that the love which a man bears to himself, is a love of sentiment, or a blind instinct*, that is to say, an invincible inclination for well-being, and an insurmountable aversion to pain : whereas the love which he conceives for some other being arises

* The love of our nearest relations has the greatest affinity to this blind love.

only from the idea of some perfection, real or supposed, which makes an impression upon him †.

Every man loves himself with this love of instinct, before he knows whether he is worthy to be loved ; and it is not because he esteems himself that he loves himself ; on the contrary, it is because he loves himself, that he esteems or endeavours to esteem himself, and for this reason does he strive hard to convince himself that he is worthy to be loved.

Let us come to the love of the Creator, which cannot be of the same kind : it is an effect of the impression which beauty and goodness naturally produce upon the understanding and sentiment, in proportion as the obstacles which intercepted them are more or less removed. We might define it to be a love of esteem and admiration, a love of sentiment also, but of a sentiment very different from that blind instinct by which we love ourselves.

The sentiment we here speak of, is nothing else but the delicate impression which the supreme perfection makes upon the heart of those who discover it, or rather who have a glimpse of it, either in itself or in its works.

Where shall we find the cause of this love ? no where, but in the nature of the object, and in the faculties which bear a relation to it. Beauty, goodness, perfection, cannot be perceived without being loved and esteemed. Any command or prohibition would be superfluous here. Even the motive of our own interest would be foreign and unnecessary ; and though our interest is concerned in it by a very natu-

† It is not possible that we should have this love of instinct for any but ourselves, or those to whom we are bound by the ties of blood. In all other respects we only love in proportion as we are struck with some amiable qualities.

ral effect, this motive is not the cause of it. In this sense we must allow that true love is independent of the reward *, and that it is in some respect disinterested. We shall not doubt of it if we consult experience.

Every man who is not buried in matter, is capable of loving real virtue, wherever he sees it. He cannot read the history of a just, beneficent, and disinterested man, without being struck with a sentiment of esteem, without feeling a sincere liking to that virtuous man †. It is therefore true, that every thing which is essentially beautiful and good, can make itself loved purely on account of what it is, setting every motive of interest aside.

Thus then have we restored disinterested love. Ought not men to congratulate themselves on their being at length capable of it in some respect? they have no great reason; because, all things duly considered, it will be found that if this love is disinterested in the actual and direct nature of it, all the steps which lead to it are unavoidably interested. I prove it thus.

The first desire which man can form, is to be happy; and when he desires to know and love God, it is a consequence of the same desire; and if this desire should be powerful enough to make him go to work with himself, strive against his inclinations, and surmount difficulties, all this labour proceeds from this, that he loves himself as he ought to do, and

* To be convinced of this, we need only suppose that the saints in heaven are arrived at the highest pitch of happiness which they can pretend to, and ask ourselves, whether upon that supposition they would cease to love God.

† We expect nothing from a man who is dead, consequently we love him without any interested view.

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that this love seriously engages him to take the road to happiness.

From all this I conclude, that the advocates for disinterested love, and those who reject it, are in some respects both in the right ; since if we grant to the former, that the direct and immediate cause of love is independent of self-interest, we must allow to the latter that the distant cause of that love, or the steps which lead to it are very interested ; and that, all things duly considered, man is too indigent to be disinterested at bottom.

L E T T E R XXVII.

To what the questions examined above relate.

S I R,

NOTHING can be more true, than the reflection which you make. Religion has been clogged with an infinite number of questions, which are foreign to it ; and which, far from leading man to the essentials thereof, are only apt to make him deviate from them.

The reason is, that men are much fonder of speculation than action. From speculation they come to disputing, and there they find a vast field to exercise their imagination. Religion, considered in its native simplicity, would cut off all occasion for debates, as we have observed oftner than once : it is only the compound multiplicity of opinions which can serve to keep them up.

With all our hearts, will some say, let it be so, we ask no better. How great a happiness would it be for Christendom, if by cutting off a multitude of opinions, Christians could be brought at last to be of one mind ! this would certainly be the case, if they would confine themselves to simple principles, and those in a very small number, or, to use a better expression, to principles so dependent of one another, that the consequences could not be set in opposition : and without going very far, it appears to me, that the essential religion, in the light we have hitherto viewed it, might be sufficient.

Here no doubt I shall be asked, whether the many knotty questions which I have sifted, and particularly the late one about disinterested love, belong to the essential religion ? how can this be reconciled with the simplicity which I ascribe to it ?

I answer, that it will be very easily reconciled, because I will most readily agree, that all questions of this sort, far from belonging to the essential religion, are quite foreign to it ; and that we have great reason to wish they had never been started. You will say, “ To what purpose then are all the pains which “ you have bestowed upon them.”

Give me leave to ask you one thing ; when a simple and even way is cumbered with thorns and briars, which cover the path and catch hold of the passengers ; does the time employed in removing these, and clearing the path, appear to you as so much time lost ? We would, I own, gladly dispense with a labour which in appearance produces nothing, of a labour purely negative, which consists not in doing but in undoing, not in putting but in taking away. Such, however, is the situation we are in with respect to religion. In vain should we propose to consider it

alone in all its simplicity, we are obliged to stop short by the way, in order to remove every thing that does not belong to it, and which people have tried to substitute in its room. This is the sole end and purpose of all the enquiries which we have made ; as it would be easy to shew.

The religion commonly received, offers to the mind so many contrarieties, or things directly opposite, that we cannot help enquiring into the cause of this, and going back as far as the principle *. Of this nature are the stubborn controversies, and the eternal disputes, upon mysteries, doctrines, the different kinds of faith, the merit of good works, what we call imputed righteousness, personal righteousness, ransom, satisfaction, payment due to justice, etc.

We would certainly not have attempted to meddle with such questions, if we had not found them in our way ; that is, if they had not obscured and even disguised the idea of the supreme perfection.

This idea, which ought indisputably to be the basis of all religion, had of itself led us to no consequences but such as are extremely uniform. It is plain therefore, that people had built upon a different foundation ; here lies the case : and if we examine this foundation closely, to what is it reduced ? to a mere supposition †. Again, upon what is this supposition grounded ? upon the nature of God, or that of man ? upon neither. It is grounded upon figurative expres-

* When opposite consequences evidently flow from the same principle, it is a certain proof that the principle is false.

† That happiness must be bought, and consequently sold.

sions, which, if understood in too literal a sense, degrade the Deity, and place him in a rank beneath us *. This is what occasions so many needless steps, so many turnings and windings which bring us back to the same place †.

To proceed, are not all the questions, which turn upon what we call sentiments of devotion, sublime motives ; I say, are they not all of the same kind ? The case is, that after having removed from religion every thing which can have no foundation in the nature of God, we should likewise have removed from it every thing that can have no foundation in the nature of man : an incontestable principle, a fixed measure, which might serve to discover a great deal of falshood. If it is true, that religion is essentially no more than a relation between God and man, a very plain consequence is, that it must be grounded upon the nature of both.

When all these difficulties are removed, what remains to be done ? there remains a thing which we are least of all fond of, I mean, to practise, to act.

To speak more justly, when all these difficulties are removed, we have others to contend with. The obstruction which the former cast in our way, consisted only in prejudice, false opinions, and the confusion of ideas which is inseparable from them ‡. It remains, I say, that we should contend with a kind

* A justice which cannot be appeased nor satisfied but by sufferings, is a thing far below the justice or equity of a virtuous man.

† The true picture of a labyrinth.

‡ Men have already in themselves so many difficult obstacles to overcome, that they had no occasion to have this confusion of ideas encreased by such a multitude of opinions.

of falshood still more pernicious, I mean that of the will, which is nourished by irregular inclinations and hidden motives, and which by a sort of counter-blow, serves even to keep up the falshood of opinions.

Let us not separate them: we should fall into a gross mistake, if we imagine ourselves wholly delivered from the yoke of prejudice. If we are come the length of removing it in part, it is only upon paper as yet. This, I own, may lead to something more; but it is only by a long exercise that we can actually be delivered from that yoke. Till then, we shall find upon a thousand occasions that we practically retain the root of our old opinions, even of those which we had discovered to be false: so true it is, that there is a great difference between giving a sort of assent to evident truths, and allowing them a full access to our minds, and an entire influence upon our conduct *.

A LETTER to the Author.

S I R,

THERE is no possibility of granting your conclusion; it concludes too much, and ends in something too serious. What! to tell us in two words, we must practise, we must act, this is too

* The former of these two things is sudden; it is the effect of a glance which the eye bestows on a vast country. The latter is a work of time, and requires a long journey to be made.

short. Besides, the sort of action which you require ! the study of ourselves, an assiduous application to check every kind of falshood in us ; is it possible to think of any thing more insipid ? you might at least have left us some small share of what is beautiful, something to support our spirits : but you allow us nothing, not even the delight which we so justly take in acting for the glory of God ; you pretend to shew us that the most virtuous man acts only for himself.

To frustrate your conclusions, I object that this idea debases religion ; that to make religion tend only to the advantage of men, is reducing it within too narrow a compass, and that at least the interest of God's glory should be allowed a share therein ; since there is great reason to presume that he had both in view when he established it. Besides, it is a received maxim, that God hath made all things for his own glory.

L E T T E R XXVIII.

Of the glory of God.

S I R,

I See very well that you desire we may still proceed in our speculations ; it is with this design that you attack me.

The question will then be to enquire what glorifies God most ; and to this I require a plain answer.

Whether is it more glorious for the supreme Being to be perfectly disinterested in what he ordains and disposes, or to be only half-disinterested, and to pro-

pose a certain glory to himself at the same time that he aims at the happiness of his creatures?

But may not our mistake concerning this pretended glory, be still owing to that imperfect way of comparing the Deity to men? these vary a good deal in the notion they have of glory. Most princes make it consist in an infinite number of external things, which it is not always in their power to preserve; such as the extent of their dominions, the number of their conquests, the dependency of their subjects, joined to that pomp which surrounds them, and to those real or supposed marks of respect by which homage is done to them. Wiser princes make it consist in procuring the happiness of their subjects, in governing them as a father governs his family, in directing all the establishments they form, and in studying to promote the public good.

Whether the princes who have considered it in this light, have acted consistently, is what I shall not pretend to determine: it is sufficient for me, that this idea of true glory, has been able to charm them, and that they have preferred it to all others, as that which suits true grandeur best. The reason is, because actually nothing appears so great to men as disinterestedness; nothing would render a sovereign more dear to his people, and nothing could subject them to his government in a more absolute manner*.

May we not suppose that this character of grandeur, the reality of which is only to be met with in

* The princes who are least capable of being disinterested, spare no pains to make their subjects believe that they have nothing but the public interest in view: he who can persuade them of this, may for that very reason be assured of a steadfast obedience.

the independent Being, is the glory that is essential to him, the glory "which he cannot give to another *;" since he is the only Being that is self-sufficient, the Being from which all others derive every thing they have. Without having a mistaken idea of him, we cannot refuse him this character. It will therefore be more glorious for God to aim solely at the interest of his creatures, in the whole of his conduct with regard to them, than to propose any advantage whatsoever to himself.

But, it will be said, where is the necessity of separating the glory of God from the interest of man? may not God have so disposed things, as that one should be connected with the other †. I most readily grant it. But give me leave to ask you, whether you consider the glory of God as the end to which the interest of man is only subordinate, so as this glory may take place to the prejudice of man? In that case, I answer, that the glory which you ascribe to God, does not so much honour as it debases him.

I ask another question; is the glory of God to be found any where else but in the manifestation of his attributes? for it will be granted me, that God cannot derive his glory from any thing that is foreign to him. When God produces some work, where almighty power, wisdom, and goodness are discovered, he manifests his glory; and this glory is nothing else

* The scripture seems to point at the supreme independency of the first Being, by calling him the first and last. In the same place it is said, "that he will not give his glory to another." Isaiah xlviii.

† It is surprizing to see that men should arrogate to themselves a sort of disinterestedness, whilst they hardly allow that God is entirely disinterested.

but the beauty, the perfection, and the harmony which we observe to shine in that work.

I say then, that man would not be a perfect work, if he was not happy * ; and that if God could desire a glory prejudicial to man, he would thereby tarnish the glory which consists in the perfection of his work ; the consequence of which would be, that the glory of God would be opposite to his glory † ; a manifest contradiction.

Let us confess the truth : the loose definitions with which men put up, are pretty commonly the cause of the contradictions which they fall into : but the custom they have of comparing God to themselves, and of furnishing him with the motives that actuate them, misleads them still more.

If there is any thing at all, in which man is not to be compared to the Deity, it is glory.

Let us try, if possible, to give a more accurate idea of the glory of God ; and let us distinguish it

* Happy sooner or later ; we have here in our eye a certain equivocal maxim " that God has made all things " for his own glory, even the wicked for the day of calamity." To this relate other maxims which are drawn from scripture, as ill applied, such as this : " For this " cause have I raised thee up, for to shew in thee my " power, and that my name may be declared throughout " all the earth." Maxims, which, if extended beyond temporal punishments, would be very injurious to God, and would be apt to tarnish his glory, if it could be tarnished by the false opinions of men.

† Let us put the thing in another shape. If God made the interest of man give place to a certain glory which he himself aims at, we must suppose that either he is not powerful enough to procure that glory without making man pay for it, or else that his wisdom cannot find means to reconcile these two things.

into glory that is essential, and glory that is accessory. His essential glory is nothing else but the infinity of his attributes, his accessory glory consists in the perfection of his works. The latter, if rightly considered, is only the expression or manifestation of the former.

Men propose glory to themselves, as the end of the pains which they take, as a good which they have not, and which they want to acquire. God has no occasion to acquire glory ; he needs only act in order to manifest his.

To say that God aims at his own glory in all his works, is saying that God proposes to act suitably to his supreme perfection ; which is saying nothing at all, since it is impossible for him to act otherwise. To say that he studies the perfection of his works, with a design to acquire glory, is relapsing into the same vicious imperfect motives, which are the consequence of human weakness and insufficiency.

In effect, however strong our passion is for glory, we cannot help perceiving that there is something of vice or imperfection in proposing it for our end *.

* This perhaps will be disputed, It will be said, that there are men who value themselves upon their pursuit after glory. I answer, that this only happens with respect to those whom we call conquerors, and next to them, with respect to those who endeavour to advance themselves in the military way. Such persons are under a necessity of ascribing all to the love of glory, since it is the finest excuse which they can make for that cruel employment. It is better for them to be thought greedy of glory, than to be thought greedy of human blood. But the question here, is about pacific princes, who endeavour to make their subjects happy. Such princes as these, to whom this conduct is very glorious, are very sensible that it would be tarnishing

We could wish that it was only the natural consequence of our virtues and commendable actions.

Perhaps it will be supposed, that this motive, which is vicious or imperfect in man, would not be so in the supreme Being, because in effect glory is his due. Very well : but how come we to perceive that this motive is imperfect ? it is because we observe that glory is inseparable from goodness, of which it ought to be the effect, but not all the end.

It is then precisely, because glory is essential to God, that he has no occasion to propose it for his aim * : it is the inseparable effect of all his productions, and, as it were, a rebounding of the supreme perfection.

It is therefore not true, that God aims at the happiness of men with a view to his own glory, and that this glory is the end, to which their interest is only subordinate. For in that case, God would not do good to men, because he is good, but for the glory of being so : and this is precisely the vicious character which we ourselves disclaim.

Let us conclude, that God aims at the happiness of his creatures, merely because he is good ; and that if it is glorious for him to be good, this glory is only the effect of his goodness, and cannot be the end of it.

Let us see now whether this idea debases religion.

their glory, to say that it is the end which they pursue in the exercise of goodness and justice. This would be tacitly supposing that they are not essentially good and just, and that do not love goodness in itself, but the glory which it may procure to them.

* A person does not purpose for his aim what he is already possessed of, much less what is essential to his nature.

Religion, as we have observed, is essentially no more than a relation between God and man. Now I ask, whether it is with respect to God or man, that religion would be debased? I presume it is with respect to man.

In that case, I do not deny the charge, I confess that this idea degrades man, or rather, that it brings him back to his proper place; it strips him of several borrowed motives, but at the same time it disentangles him *, and puts him in a condition to act.

It is true, that man is here excused from making God's glory the motive of his pursuit after happiness †; but he is only excused from it, as from a thing impossible.

* Every thing that is borrowed, is not only useless to man, but is like a clog, which hinders him from proceeding in his journey.

† If we should grant that God's purpose was to make men serve as so many instruments, which concur to the manifestation of his glory, it would not follow, that in order to do this, every one of these men must necessarily propose that glory for his end. To conceive this, we need only figure to ourselves a vast building, undertaken by a skilful architect, who employs workmen without number. I ask, whether every one of these workmen has the glory of the architect in view? it is the farthest thing from their thoughts. One is busied in making mortar, another in hewing stones, a third in sawing wood; and the motive which engages them, they will tell you very honestly, is, that they may have wherewithal to fill their bellies. The work however goes on apace. Suppose now that every one of these artificers was to fancy and say, that the glory of the architect is the end of their labour: what would happen? should we not conceive them to talk like visionaries; laugh at them in our own sleeve, and know what we ought to think?

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If this idea of religion does not give a great deal of glory to men, it is because it restores to God the glory which they had usurped. It restores to him the glory of being perfectly disinterested, of having no need of a foreign glory *, of being in that respect freely beneficent †, and of being able to give always, without ever having the least occasion to receive.

I am much inclined to believe, that this is the only glory which is applicable to the supreme Being.

* Might we not conclude from hence, that men are far from having it in their power to promote the glory of God by any thing they can imagine ; and that if they are the instruments of doing so, it is rather when they pursue their own interest, than when they exert themselves, as they say, for the glory of God.

† This here is the only foundation of a voluntary obedience. Let us suppose a man, who considers God in this light, will he find much difficulty in resolving to submit to the will of a master, who asks nothing for himself, and who in the obedience he requires, only consults the interest of those persons whom he seems to command ? This is the only subjection which does not derogate from the liberty of man, and which puts no constraint upon him : he goes where he designed to go ; he only consents to be ruled by a guide, who knows the way better than himself.

L E T T E R XXIX.

Of the motives which can effectually determine us to make sacrifices.

S I R,

SHALL I tell you, that I suspect your new objection proceeds from a desire that we should continue our speculations ?

Religion, in the light I have represented it, would, as you say, be stript of the motives which are generally employed to induce men to suffer, and to sacrifice upon occasion the things which are dearest to them. I have a quite different opinion, and am firmly persuaded, that if there are in life such delicate occasions, where a man is called to suffer, the love of one's self, when rightly understood, will be sufficient alone, without any other motives being joined to it.

This, I allow, may seem too selfish ; but, as we lately agreed, the disinterestedness of which a man is capable, is a mere trifle. Perhaps his nature will not admit of more. In that case, what advantage could he propose to get by amusing himself with fine ideas void of reality, and which would only lead him to vain and fruitless efforts. Among these efforts, I place every thing that is grounded on the following maxims : “ Do this for the love of God, for the glory of God : nothing that a person does for a beloved object, seems hard to him.”

How many maxims of this sort are there, which sound high and charm the ear, while we only hear

them repeated? but the main point is to put them in practice; and it is precisely here that the mistake lies. If we enquire into the cause of this mistake, may we not likewise find it in the imperfect comparison, that is drawn between the love of God and the love of man. This comparison, I know, may be admitted in a certain degree; but as it often errs fundamentally, when it is carried too far, it cannot but deceive us.

True love, if there is such a thing, consists in the concern we have for the happiness of the persons beloved, so as that we omit nothing we can do to procure it, but on the contrary, are fully disposed, if need should require, to sacrifice many things, either to rid them from pain, or to make their condition more happy. This love, if such a love there is, borders somewhat upon disinterestedness; and we must allow, that it tends more to the advantage of the persons beloved, than to that of those who love them, unless where there is a suitable return.

The love, we call passion, cannot be ranked in the same class. If it puts on the appearance of being disinterested, this can only be in point of money, and it is even very rare to find such a love: in all other respects, it is wholly incapable of being so, which it would be needless to attempt to prove.

This love however, selfish as it is, may sometimes induce us to sacrifice things. But to whom is the sacrifice made in the like case? to ourselves, no doubt. we therefore purchase some good, real or imaginary, which we value more than what we give in exchange for it: we do not resolve upon such a thing, without expecting a return.

It is said, that *nothing is hard for a person who loves*; and upon this we build the sublime moral of

sacrificing our interest to that of the glory of God. Nothing has a more noble appearance. But I believe it is precisely here, that the comparison errs fundamentally. Let us see. Is it because the principle of such sacrifices is disinterested, that they are not hard? quite the reverse: for it is plain, that the only thing which makes them easy, is our relying upon a compensation. It is to ourselves that we sacrifice. A person thinks it no great trouble to sow, when the harvest is to be his own.

If it is true, that men are so framed, (and I doubt whether any body will venture to dispute it) we can no longer suppose, that effects, which cost them dear, can proceed from a disinterested principle; on the contrary, we shall find, that they only consent to such effects with a view to their greater interest *.

* But hold! say you: is virtue then of such a nature, that it can only make us act from this consideration? is there not something foreign in this same motive taken from another world?

I answer, that there is a difference to be made between the exercise of virtue, considered in itself, and the hardships or the sacrifices to which it may lead one. The reason is, because good, as such, has nothing contrary to the human nature in it; from whence it follows, that a man truly virtuous may very naturally do good, without being influenced by any thing else but an honest heart, and a beneficent inclination.

It is not so with respect to pain: far from being suited to nature, to nature even in right order, it is extremely opposite thereto. Hence it follows, that our consent to any kind of suffering can only proceed from the belief or hopes of a compensation.

To take the matter thus, we shall find that this consent is grounded, not only upon the nature of man, but upon that of God himself: since it is impossible to suppose, that

You take a pleasure, will some perhaps say to me, in debasing man : you have nevertheless granted him a sort of disinterestedness ; and even with respect to his fellow-creatures, you have not judged him entirely incapable of it.

It is true, that if man is susceptible of any sort of disinterestedness, he would find it much easier to exercise it towards his fellow-creatures, than towards God. What comes nearest this idea is friendship. It is not without example, that friends have sacrificed thereto : but we must not examine too narrowly, whether these sacrifices are wholly disinterested, and whether there are no hopes of a return, or of a compensation, either in full or in part, from the gratitude that is expected.

Once more, we must not be too nice in looking for a perfect disinterestedness. Let us not rob such a man of the satisfaction he feels from the gratitude of his friend. Perhaps indeed, he would not have carried his services so far, if this friend must never have known it. But no matter ; if he would still have carried them a certain length, it is more than the other had a right to expect.

It is then true, that man would not want opportunities of exercising his disinterestedness towards his fellow-creatures, and that to supply the room of that perfect disinterestedness, of which perhaps he is not susceptible, he may perform services to them which cost him dear, and which are very advantageous to them, without precisely expecting a return.

God can consent to the sufferings of his creatures, without having a view to their greater advantage, or to make them capable of a higher degree of happiness.

But if we shift the scene, I am much puzzled to comprehend how he can practise this disinterestedness towards the supreme Being. What we do for a friend, turns to his advantage. The pains we are at for him, serve either to rid him of some misfortune, or to procure him relief; and the relief he gets thereby, gives a sensible pleasure to a beneficent heart. But how shall we exercise this beneficent inclination towards the supreme Being? what hopes of relief shall we procure to him? will he reap any advantage from our pains, or will he be at all benefited by the sacrifices that we shall make to him?

Here you desire me to stop, and to observe, that if these pains or sacrifices are of no use to the supreme Being, they may be very useful to me; and that it is only with a view to my advantage, that a Being infinitely good can consent to see me suffer.

I desire you, in my turn, to stop and observe, that you fly off from the notion of disinterestedness, it escapes you on this critical occasion; and as soon as you would induce me to suffer or make sacrifices, it becomes useless to you, and you are obliged to appeal to my own interest, and to my greater advantage.

I understand you now; this language comes within the reach of my capacity; and it is possible, that, after being once convinced of the necessity of chusing between the two, I may resolve to lose a small good, in order to obtain a greater.

We must return to this. In vain should we flatter ourselves with a chimerical generosity; a sufficient proof of which is, that the moralists, who soar highest in the sublime motive of the interest of God's glory, are obliged to come down again, and to return to the interest of man himself, when the business

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is to make him act *. Without this, experience shews sufficiently, that all their eloquence is to no purpose.

They do not however cease to require, that we should join all these motives together. To be only determined by that of our own interest, would, according to them, denote a very mercenary way of thinking. But I would entreat them to tell me, whether the motive, without which we would not be determined, does not subsist alone †, and whether those which they pretend to add to it, are not superfluous and mere kick-shaws, which consequently have no effect, unless it be to give a false lustre to the man who decks himself therewith, and esteems himself accordingly.

May we not infer from hence, that the necessity of humbling or debasing ourselves ‡, as the phrase is,

* Witness this usual way of expressing ourselves in like case: "You will have no occasion to repent it one day: you sow little, and you will reap much." Witness also this declaration of St. Paul: "After all, I do not think, that the sufferings of this world are to be compared," etc. So true it is, that men always calculate. See letter twelfth.

† If it is still objected, that the desire of pleasing God may induce us to make sacrifices, abstracting from the motive of our own interest, I answer, that this is only going round in a circle. I take you at your word: What determines us to make these sacrifices, is, according to you, the desire of pleasing God. Why do you desire to please him? that you may have his approbation. Why do you desire his approbation? that you may be happy. Ah! why did you not tell me directly, that it was the desire of being happy, which determined you to make these sacrifices?

‡ What makes us liable to be imposed upon in point of humility, is, our condering it as something positive, as a vir-

and the danger of becoming self-conceited in that respect, have no other cause but a false elevation, and an imaginary beauty, to which we endeavour to soar. If it were not for this, man would continue in his proper situation, he would have no occasion to come down again ; and the efforts he makes to lower himself sufficiently shew, that he is out of his place.

But are not these efforts so much lost labour, since after he is come down, he must soar anew, in order to regain these fine motives : motives which he is obliged to have, and without which he would reproach himself with having a very mercenary soul.

The misfortune is, that, after regaining these noble and exalted motives, the least reflexion he makes upon them is sufficient to infect him with the subtle poison of pride.

To speak seriously, can virtue be of such a nature as not to be perceived, without bringing along with it the most dangerous poison * ? In that case, it would be incomparably more prejudicial than advantageous to mankind ; or should we not have more reason-

tue which ought to produce acts in us. It is nevertheless true, that humility is no such thing ; that the reality of it is purely negative ; that it consists in not imposing upon ourselves, as to the nature of our dispositions, and in calling every thing by its own name.

* The most virtuous man, if he knew himself thoroughly, would find no cause to be self-conceited ; he would not need to hide from himself either his talents, or his virtues ; it would be enough for him, if he set no higher value upon them than he ought ; he would thereby be dispensed from those acts of humility, by which we endeavour to persuade ourselves that we deserve nothing, that we do nothing for God, etc. Efforts which tacitly suppose, and which prove beyond dispute, that, in our own opinion, we do something.

to conclude, that such a thing as real virtue is hardly known?

L E T T E R XXX.

Of self-love.

S I R,

ARE you in earnest when you accuse me of making an apology for self-love? according to you, it is so-like that love of one's self which I authorize, that it is not easy to distinguish one from the other. After supposing this, you observe, that it would be absurd to pretend to lead men to good by a vicious principle. I am of the same opinion.

The truth is, I make a very great difference between the love of one's self rightly understood, and that vicious principle, which we call self-love. I say more: the latter seems to me to be directly opposite to the former *: it is properly speaking no more than a false love of one's self; which, far from leading man to his aim, removes him to an infinite distance from it.

To love ourselves, is, to wish ourselves well. Love rightly understood cleaves to good itself: false love is satisfied with the appearance of it.

* The love of one's self rightly understood, would be one of the foundations of civil society, whereas self-love is the ruin of it: and it is only to prevent the disorder, which the latter would occasion, that men have been obliged to form establishments, which serve as a curb to it, and which without that would be superfluous.

Man is so framed for good, that the very name of it makes an agreeable impression upon him ; and evil is so contrary to his nature, that the bare idea of it is painful to him. He therefore necessarily follows after good, as he necessarily flies from evil. What deceives him is a vicious taste, a false discernment which makes him mistake one for the other.

The first kind of good which man is capable of relishing is natural good, every thing that concerns the well-being of the body : as the first evil of which he is sensible, is whatever can alter or impair this.

A sensibility, with respect to this kind of good, has nothing in it but what is reasonable ; it is real in its kind, and in vain do certain moralists charge it with being false : perhaps they only do so in conversation, whereas practically they judge of it in another manner. The truth is, that it is not in a man's power to be indifferent about well-being, and in this respect he cannot be mistaken.

Here begins his mistake : this good is of a very limited kind, whereas the faculty of desire, with which man is endowed, has no bounds. Hence it follows, that as this faculty cannot be satisfied with a good which is too much inferior to it, a man comes to imagine, that the thirst which torments him is only occasioned by his not having a sufficiency of that good ; from thence proceed what we call avarice, ambition, etc. *.

The truth is, that what would be good for man, while he acts a part suitable to the purpose of his being, will cease to be so, when he deviates from this

* The height of our mistake is, when we imagine, that this insufficient good, being accumulated to a certain quantity, acquires the quality of the true good.

end, and subverts all order. What proves that this good becomes a real evil, is, that the relish he has for it, extinguishes in him all relish for a superior good *, and that he gratifies the former to the prejudice of the latter.

In effect, our greedy desire of what we call good, naturally leads us to the violation of truth and equity. The reason is, because this kind of good necessarily occasions a competition, since all cannot enjoy at the same time the wealth and honours to which they aspire. It is this same competition which makes room for the most devouring passions. Here jealousy is unavoidable; and what clandestine and under-hand practices does it not occasion? Let us draw the curtain here: we should have too much work upon our hands, if we were to describe the havock and disorder, which the false love of one's self, or self-love, produces in society.

It produces fully as much, if not more, with respect to religion: we could hardly believe it, if experience did not prove it to us: for, after all, it is evident, that moral good, truth, justice, etc. I say, that this good is of such a nature, as not to occasion any competition. We might call it an universal good: and this being supposed, where could there be any room left for jealousy?

Nothing however is more certain. It is for this good, which men call truth, that they tear one another most: and what proves, that they do not consider it as universal, is, that it would not answer the idea which they form of it, if it was not entirely for

* Our taste and discernment, when we fix them on limited objects, are limited by that very thing: we have little or none left for objects of another kind; nothing seems more insipid to us.

themselves, that is, for the society of which they are members *.

It is here that jealousy finds room to play, and that zeal exerts itself. We would not be content with being in the right ourselves, if all others were not in the wrong. It is debasing truth, to consider it as a common good to which all men may pretend; and heaven itself would lose a good deal of its value, if we must have it in common, and share it with every body †. It is quite another sort of satisfaction to be able to congratulate ourselves on our being comprehended in the number of the few; and our gratitude will be much greater, when we shall see ourselves preferred to so many thousands of our fellow-creatures.

Men probably expect to carry their self-love to heaven with them: it will be very necessary there, since it will heighten their felicity, and consequently their gratitude.

* This is literally the case with the Christians, who in this respect are a true copy of the Jews. When we read the history of the latter, we cannot sufficiently wonder at their folly, in pretending to be the sole depositaries of truth. But when we behold the different societies of Christians, our wonder ceases. We find there the same spirit of jealousy carried to the highest pitch: the exclusion of others is what gives the most sensible pleasure; it is even the foundation upon which many build their gratitude.

† There are persons who are offended if any one ventures to tell them, that it is possible all men may one day be partakers of the same happiness. What name shall we give to this jealousy? is it a part of religion; or does it not much more resemble those devouring passions, which we call avarice, ambition, envy itself: passions, which teach a man to wish all for himself, and to make his evil to consist in the good of others.

Here we pretty clearly perceive the difference between self-love, or false love, and the love of one's self rightly understood. The latter, in searching after good itself, does not pretend to exclude any body from it, because this good is of a nature to be shared without raising any strife or competition; whereas the former mistaking the true good, is not content but when it flatters itself with a particular distinction.

The reason is, because the false love of ourselves is eagerly fond, not of good itself, but of the esteem which it procures: and in the same manner does it conceive an extreme aversion, not to evil, but to the blame or contempt which attend it.

Hence it comes, that men insensibly accustom themselves to propose esteem for their end*: so that they are careful to seem virtuous or honest men, rather

* This is so true, that esteem is proposed to children as the end which they ought to have in view. This language, by being often repeated, ceases to have any thing shocking to us, and we should rather be amazed to see people find fault with it. Let us see however what it aims at, or what it supposes. It exactly supposes what has been advanced, viz. that man indifferent with respect to good itself, puts up with the shadow of it, with esteem which is no more than a consequence of good, which ought never to be the end of it.

I will venture to say more. All means subordinate to an end, are only good in so far as they relate to the end. Now, if esteem is the end, and good the means, good will not be desirable, but in so far as it relates to esteem. The consequence of this will be, that as esteem may be procured by the appearances of good, men will put up with the appearance; as in effect they most readily do.

than to be so in effect, and to shun blame and contempt rather than vice itself *.

There is still another reason, why this kind of good may cause a competition. It is this : the esteem of other men is of a very limited nature, it cannot be divided without losing a great deal of its value : hence it comes, that those who pretend to deserve it, would wish to have it all to themselves, or at least to possess it, in such a distinguishing manner, that none else should come within a great many degrees of it. Experience proves it, and whatever pains people take to conceal this passion, they cannot impose upon others.

Let us suppose a man who passed in the public esteem for a person of consummate abilities, and of an exquisite judgment. Another appears upon the stage, who is judged to have the same capacity, and is therefore equaled to him. The latter thinks himself disgraced thereby, and it looks as if what was given to one, was so much taken from the other. He can-

* This is the most distinguishing character of self-love, and its effects are pretty much the same, though they differ as to circumstances. We have observed, that it makes men beyond all comparison fonder of esteem than virtue. The case is exactly the same with respect to truth : the extreme jealousy, which they discover in this respect, relates much more to the name than to the thing itself. A proof of this is, that all their proceedings tend rather to persuade others, that they have found the truth, than to enquire after it seriously. To what do those amazing volumes, or rather those heaps of controversies tend ? what can be the scheme of that croud of writers, who have exhausted themselves in disputes ? is it to discover truth ? not at all. It is to convince others, that they are in possession of it, and that it is entirely on their side.

not bear to be equaled : what would the case be, if he saw himself surpassed ?

Does it appear to you, after what has been said, that this blind love of one's self bears the least resemblance to that reasonable love which I authorize ? I fancy not. The effects of the former are, you see, neither very advantageous to religion, nor to civil society.

To set the contrast in its full light, I am very sensible, that it would be necessary to point out or describe the effects of the other, which would not be an easy matter. Nevertheless, if I should catch myself in the humour to undertake it, for in nothing of this kind ought we to say nay, I may perhaps do it effectually.

LETTER XXXI.

Of the effects of the love of one's self rightly understood.

S I R,

IT was no hard matter to describe the effects of self-love ; we see nothing else either in ourselves, or others. But where shall we find persons that know how to love themselves with a reasonable love ; that is, who know how to love goodness, the goodness that is suitable to man ?

What then is goodness ? Is there not something in it which makes it necessarily amiable ? why do we love the effects of it in others ? and why is the bare idea of a man truly good sufficient to draw our esteem ?

R

Is it because the effects of goodness in others reach as far as us, and serve to promote our interest in divers respects? that may very well be. It is not however the only cause; the truth of which evidently appears from this, that we may conceive the same sentiment of esteem for a man that lived some ages ago, and consequently from whom we expect no advantage.

This leads us to conclude, that goodness has an intrinsic value; and that it is amiable and worthy of esteem in itself, abstracting from its effects: which being supposed, it follows, that this goodness must be of such a nature, as to contribute still more to the happiness of the person in whom it resides, than to that of those who know it only by the advantages which they draw from it.

Whence comes it then, that men who always aim at what they think best for them, are so little ambitious to have in themselves the reality of that goodness, which they so highly esteem in others? this contrast is perplexing.

Do they vary in their esteem of goodness? by no means: they never renounce the right they have to pretend to it; and the extreme jealousy which they shew for every thing that has the appearance of goodness, is a sign that they do not mean to abate of this right.

But do they value in others those appearances, which they put up with as sufficient for themselves? Oh! we must distinguish here: the case is very different, they want a real goodness in others*.

* What can occasion such a surprizing contrast? perhaps divers things contribute towards it.

Thus you see, that, by the way, and without directly attending to it, I have made good my thesis. I take my proof of it from the general approbation, which all men are obliged to give to real goodness; from their allowing unanimously, that if every member of society knew how to love goodness itself, the sweetest concord, and the most perfect harmony would follow upon it.

The thing is not at all doubtful. If it is once settled, that to love one's self ill, to cleave to some false or seeming good, is the source of all competition, of all discord; it is indisputably settled, by the rule of contraries, that to love one's self reasonably, to cleave to a good which can raise no competition, is the source of all good agreement.

A LETTER to the Author.

S I R,

WE cannot deny it: if men had really the thing of which they put on the appearance, society would change its condition, it would become

As we lately observed, the relish which men has for beauty and perfection, his impatient desire to see himself possessed of these things, proves accidentally the cause which removes him from them. The reason is this; by an effect of that very impatience, he greedily takes hold of the smallest glimpse, the slightest appearance of goodness; he comes insensibly to take it for goodness itself; and what contributes still more to make him put up with this, is the esteem which he perceives other people have for it.

a paradise. What then hinders this to be the case, at least with respect to those who profess a sincere esteem for goodness? would it cost them more to become actually what they endeavour to seem?

LETTER XXXII.

Answer to the preceding objection.

S I R,

HERE lies the point. All men have in themselves the seeds or principles of goodness. These seeds are, as it were, buried under the lumber of a vast many obstacles.

Some of these obstacles are of a nature foreign to man: others are in a manner inherent, they spring from his own bottom.

In the first class, I range the falshood of prejudice and of a multitude of opinions. In the second, I place his irregular appetites or inclinations, which meet with but too great encouragement from external obstacles*.

It so happens then, that these bad principles, having a great ascendant over man, conspire to stifle the seeds of goodness, or at least to shut them up, and hinder them from breaking out.

Though the principle of goodness is very simple, and consequently single, we may consider it in two different lights; in one, as it relates to what is true; in the other, as it relates to what is good and just.

* Example and custom.

In the first respect, it ought to prevail over the falshood of opinions; in the second, over what is evil and unjust.

Though falshood in point of opinion, is the easiest to destroy, yet it cannot be really destroyed, but in so far as it is attacked by degrees.

Let us here recall an observation which we have already made * : it is this, that a dissertation which at once discovers to you the falshood of a great many opinions, does not for that reason destroy the principle of them. It is a help, I allow; these are so many boughs lopt off: but once more, we must go to the root, we must learn from experience to discern what is true, by a delicate taste, by a sentiment of truth which carries its own evidence along with it, or to come nearer to the point, we must † distrust our secret inclinations, our hidden views, which may disguise part of the truth from us, and substitute in its room a kind of falshood more dangerous still than that which we fancy we have destroyed.

But what makes the work tedious is, that we have it often to begin again; and no sooner is one obstacle removed, but new ones start up.

We meet with a greater number of obstacles still, with respect to goodness and justice. It is here that we daily find ourselves under a fresh necessity of learning from experience how far we are distant from

* See the twenty seventh letter, near the end.

† This is the main point. The smallest insight into ourselves, will discover to us, that it is almost continually owing to some hidden principle, that we endeavour to elude certain truths: so true it is, that every thing is practice in religion, without even excepting that which seems to be of a speculative nature!

them. Here there is nothing little, nothing to be overlooked, nothing that may not have the authority of a master in this school.

What do we learn besides ? nothing that appears ; not the least thing that makes a shew. We learn, it is true, to become equitable *, but is there any thing that appears less † ? for we must not deceive ourselves, it is not by a glaring apparatus that we acquire this habit, it is only so far proportionably, as we strive against its contraries in ourselves ‡ : a study which is consequently very mortifying §.

Is it a question to be asked after this, why men prefer the appearances of goodness to the reality thereof ?

* An important study, which is of all the most neglected, because it is but little exposed to observation.

† It will perhaps be objected, that nothing is more esteemed than an equitable man, and nothing more despised than a man who is known to be the reverse. I allow it ; but then I observe, that it is much easier to distinguish a man that is not equitable, than to distinguish those who are truly so. The truth is, that what is real in an equitable disposition, is the thing which men perceive least : it exercises itself in an infinite number of respects, which are so small in themselves, that it is not easy to set a proper value upon them.

‡ These contraries are hardly perceived, but by the difficulty we find in overcoming them : in other respects, we let slip an infinite number of those occasions where it would be necessary for us to check ourselves. In what ? in a thousand little injustices which we do to our neighbour, and for which we never upbraid ourselves in the least.

§ At least, if we do not confine the idea of an equitable disposition, to that of not encroaching upon the properties of others. Those who know it in itself, will take care not to confound it with what is only the bark or outside of it.

A LETTER to the Author.

S I R,

YOU speak of equity on all occasions, and you do not make the least mention of charity *. This is failing in the essential point ; since, according to St. Paul, he that wants charity is nothing, whatever fine qualities he may have in other respects.

L E T T E R XXXIII.

Of charity.

S I R,

IT is true, I have not yet spoke of charity; that is, I have not named it ; and the reason is, because this expression seems to me indistinct, and often equivocal, at least if we consider it as independent of an equitable disposition.

It is very possible however, that charity, rightly understood, is essentially the same thing with equity itself, or its natural and inseparable effect, if you will needs have it to be only a consequence thereof.

The word *charity*, is taken in different senses. Our

* This objection is parallel to the one made upon faith, letter sixteenth. Perhaps it would not be hard to prove, that as sincerity is the foundation of faith, so equity is in like manner the true foundation of charity.

catechisms tells us, that charity consists in the love of God and of our neighbour.

Others reduce this word simply to the love of our neighbour, and to the practice of the duties which relate thereto.

Others give a more limited signification to the word *charity*; and take it only in a sense of compassion, for a disposition to relieve the wretched.

To avoid all equivocation, I think we ought to pitch upon the second sense *, which, far from excluding the last, necessarily supposes and comprehends it.

Thus are we upon the point of examining what the nature is of that love of our neighbour, which is so strongly recommended to us.

But one thing stops me here. If what we have so often repeated is true, viz. that love is not to be commanded, that the heart is framed in such a manner, as not to love any thing but what appears amiable to it: in short, if it is true, that all precepts about love are superfluous †, we shall be very much puzzled. What shall we do with the many precepts that command us to love our neighbour, and to love him as ourselves? once more, how shall we extricate ourselves from this difficulty?

Must we suppose that the gospel commands us to do a thing impossible? or must we blindly suppose,

* If it is pretended, that the word *charity* ought to stand for the love of God and that of our neighbour, I am not against it: but as I have pretty largely described that part of charity which relates to God, the question now is about the love of our neighbour.

† The faculty of loving is purely passive. Now we have observed that passive faculties cannot receive precepts.

that it is possible for us to love upon command ? neither one nor the other, methinks. The first supposition would be injurious to the Author of the gospel. The second would be opposite to the laws of nature, and consequently to the intentions of him who is the Author of nature.

Is there no medium to be taken ? I fancy there is. This medium would be to reconcile the gospel to itself, and to reconcile it at the same time to the inviolable laws of nature. Hence it would indisputably follow, that nature and the gospel have but one and the same original *.

Let us see then, what are the evangelical propositions in which charity is recommended. There is a very great number of them, both in the gospels and in the epistles. They have but one signification however, to which their number adds nothing, and they may all be reduced to this. "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye love one another."

Upon hearing these precepts, I feel myself unmoved ; a certain sentiment which I cannot get rid off, tacitly says to me : "How is it possible to obey ? is man so framed as to be capable of it ?"

Let us look further, and take some other proposition in the gospel. Shall we not find one that is within our reach, and to which we are obliged to assent readily ? here is the very proposition we wanted : "All things which ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them in like manner, for this is the law and the prophets."

* An important remark. To set the gospel at variance with the laws of nature, is not the way to extol, but to degrade it.

It must be owned, this single proposition is worth a thousand : every thing in man agrees to it, without making the least opposition.

What is this law at bottom ? it is the immutable law of equity : a law so universal, and wrote in such legible characters, that the greatest idiots cannot help knowing it, and it is even respected by the most barbarous nations.

Are we then commanded to be equitable, or to endeavour to become so ? without dispute. Here the voice of the gospel and that of nature, are but one and the same voice * : consequently we cannot refuse our assent to it †. There is no room here for the presence of impossibility.

Hence it begins to appear why we have, on divers occasions, proposed an equitable disposition as the basis of all virtue, and why we have made no direct mention of the virtue called charity.

The truth is, we get little, by proposing to men dispositions, which are at so great a distance from them, that they cannot reach them, nor so much as attempt to do so ‡ : or if any thing follows upon

* It is this harmony between the gospel and nature, which gives weight and an undeniable authority to the former.

† It will be said, that man refuses his assent to it in his conduct : this is true, but his understanding never refuses its assent. Ask him, at any time you will, whether he acknowledges the justice of this law, he will, without hesitation, give you a positive answer. The truth is, that even while he deviates from this law, he takes pains to persuade himself that his conduct is conformable to it : and is not this a tacit acknowledgement of the authority which it has in his opinion ?

‡ This is the very thing which hinders them from being moved.

this, it can only be some imaginary efforts by which they endeavour to persuade themselves that they are not very far from that admirable virtue, that divine charity which makes us love our neighbour as ourselves.

How! will you say: does the gospel mean nothing by so many repeated exhortations to charity, and the love of our neighbour, especially since these exhortations point out this love as the most distinguishing character of evangelical perfection?

Pardon me, I think it does mean something. These invitations ought to point at some end. May not this end be to make men see, though at a very great distance, the disposition to which they ought to attain some time or other, and to make them feel at the same time, by the opposition they meet with in themselves, how far they are yet from it.

These invitations, considered in this light, far from being superfluous, might be of great use. This use would be, to hinder men from imagining that they are very near the end. To perceive how much they want of it, they need only compare what they are with the end which is proposed to them, and they will see that they have a great way to go.

This, methinks, is the true meaning of so many precepts, the practice of which seems, and actually is impossible, though it will not always be so.

The truth is, men will love one another, when they shall come to be truly amiable *; and they will really be so, when they shall be brought back to order, and restored to their primitive integrity †.

* They will then love one another, without needing to be commanded so to do.

† Must we then refer this happy disposition to another world? yes, if the question is about a love that embraces

In the mean time, the best thing they can do, is mutually to bear with one another * ; and they will do so, if they are equitable †.

Thus are we come back from charity to equity. We shall consider the former as the end of our journey, and the latter as the only way which can lead us thither.

all mankind ; since it is very certain, that till then there will be few men truly worthy to be loved. But if we consider the thing in a less strict sense, nothing hinders us from supposing, that if there are in the world, men truly worthy of esteem, and if there are others capable of knowing them, and of distinguishing what is essentially good in them, without stopping at the appearances which many put on ; we may suppose, I say, that if there are men of this stamp, they will not only be able to love one another, but it will even be impossible for them not to do so.

* This is indisputably the most reasonable task which men can propose to themselves, since it is most within their reach, and at the same time the best suited to their present melancholly condition : a condition which often makes them in a manner insupportable to one another, and that sometimes not for the sake of vices, but for the sake of imperfections which are purely natural. It is self-love that is shocked at the sight of such imperfections ; perhaps vices would offend it less : equity alone can set us right in that matter.

† An equitable disposition would teach us to set a just value upon every thing. By putting ourselves in the place of that neighbour who appears contemptible to us, we should see how unjust it is to make him answerable for things which it was not in his power to help : this is one of those injustices for which we seldom upbraid ourselves.

A LETTER to the Author.

S I R,

IT must be allowed, nothing enlarges the mind more than this way of considering charity and equity, and assigning to each its proper place.

Where this is not the case, we torture ourselves at a strange rate about conceiving an affection for our neighbour, while at bottom we only entertain a great indifference, or perhaps an aversion to him, though we are careful not to own it ; for we do not fail to say to ourselves, that we ought to love our very enemies.

Now we speak of the love of our enemies, I forgot to tell you that it might have found a place among those evangelical counsels, the severity of which you have taken pains to vindicate. This is a precept, which, as all men agree, is the most harsh, and the most difficult to be observed.

L E T T E R XXXIV.

Of the love of our enemies.

S I R,

THE precept which enjoins us to love our enemies, is of a nature quite different from that of the evangelical counsels, which we have endeavoured to defend *.

* The latter are under the jurisdiction of the free and active faculties ; they are the objects of discernment and

Be that as it will, this is the properest place to speak of such a precept : our answer is ready, the principles upon which our answer goes, being all settled *.

If it is true, that we cannot love an object, but so far as it appears amiable to us, it is impossible to have tenderness for an enemy, for a man who hates us, who endeavours to hurt us ; since such a man, whatever he be, necessarily appears to us very hateful.

But is it impossible to be equitable towards an enemy ? it is very difficult, I own, but not utterly impossible : and this I think is the great effort, which the gospel requires a man to make, and the only thing it can require †.

The gospel itself supposes it, and that too in the text, where the love of our enemies is recommended. Jesus Christ, after having said, " Love your enemies," adds, " Do good to them that hate you." Is not this explaining one proposition by another ? or at least, is it not pointing out to man, by one clear and most intelligible precept, the way that may lead them to the fulfilling of the other. And this way is nothing else but that of equity : a way which is undoubtedly attended with difficulties, but which is not impracticable.

choice. The former is under the jurisdiction of the passive capacity, to which it is very needless to give precepts, as we have observed oftner than once.

* In a system, the principles of which are true, all things are consistent and hang together : these same principles furnish us with an answer to an infinite number of questions.

† This is reducing that precept to a possibility ; though it does not remove the difficulty of practising it.

It is easily conceived, that there is a difference between *loving one*, and *doing good to him* *; if the former is not in our power, the latter certainly is: for to love any person, we must find him possessed of some amiable qualities; whereas to do good to him, it is sufficient, if we see him in want of it.

But can equity require us to do good to an enemy, to a man who hurts us? it may undoubtedly require this, in divers cases; with this restriction however, that the good which we do to him, does not enable him to hurt us still more: for in this case, the good would become pernicious to him, and would cease to be a good †.

Excepting this, there are a thousand occasions, wherein humanity alone leads us to give an assistance to an enemy ‡, and wherein it would be not only a severity, but likewise an injustice to refuse it.

These however are only visible effects of an equitable disposition: they are sometimes doubtful §, they may proceed from ostentation; or may even tend to humble an enemy still more, by the mortification they give him. Real equity goes farther, or rather proceeds from a more remote cause: it proceeds from a principle concealed from the eyes of

* A distinction which begins to clear up the question.

† A necessary remark, but which, persons who are little disposed to be equitable, may wrongfully use, in order to dispense with doing good to an enemy.

‡ Humanity and equity are not very unlike to one another; or rather, they are inseparably connected together.

§ Men are capable to do actions seemingly very equitable, nay generous, but it is not certain, whether these actions always proceed from a fund, or principle of equity.

men, and this hidden principle is the cause of all good effects.

This principle is in truth nothing else but the study of one's self, a study entered upon with sincerity * ; which leads us to discover in man an infinite number of secret springs that actuate him †. These springs shew themselves after different ways ; and vary in their effects, according to the diversity of circumstances which they meet with.

This being supposed, it may happen that this study, this experience may enable me to go deeper than the surface of things, may enable me to discover in that man who hates me, certain principles which render him less blameable, less hateful in my eye, than he appeared to be by his actions. This is not done by strained efforts, or by subtle reflections ‡, it is a most natural consequence of the habit, which we have more or less acquired, of putting ourselves upon all occasions, exactly in the same case with another person §, of examining and weighing the dif-

* This is a confirmation of what has been advanced, viz. That sincerity is in man the principle of all moral good.

† A man who is accustomed to examine himself, to discern the springs of his actions, may find in his own experience, if not wherewithal to justify another person, at least wherewithal to render him less blameable, and perhaps wholly to excuse him.

‡ We do not persuade ourselves to believe it ; but we very naturally think so : we are not apt to applaud ourselves for thinking in this manner ; a complaisance which generally accompanies all studied reflections.

§ A most invaluable habit ; but which is acquired very slowly. Several people fancy, they have made great progress in attaining it, when they are hardly initiated in it. The study of one's self is the measure to which this progress will infallibly bear an exact proportion. We may tell our-

ferent circumstances in which his situation has placed him, and comparing them with those whercin we find ourselves.

Now it is not to be doubted, but that this would change the point of view; perhaps it would put upon a level several things which are seemingly very unlike to each other; perhaps, I say, it might equal two men, one of whom appears to be very valuable, on account of his virtues, and the other despicable, for his vices.*.

Might it not result from thence, that a man who opposes me, may not appear hateful to me at bottom; that I may even discover in him several valuable qualities; that I may consider him as a man who is mistaken, who has been misled by certain appearances, and who has not had an opportunity of being undeceived †.

Let us agree, that these effects of an equitable disposition differ very little from what is called *charity*, and it is of little consequence by what name they go. All the difference I can see, is, that *charity*, if by

selves a hundred times over, that we must put ourselves in the same case with our neighbour, and by this alone we may imagine that we do it. The distance between these two things is very considerable.

* This would destroy the many false comparisons, which we tacitly make between ourselves and our neighbours, and all of which tend to make us over-rate ourselves by undervaluing them.

† Prejudice frequently contributes much to set men at variance. Now a good man might have found himself in such circumstances, that he could not have avoided prejudice. This being supposed, it may naturally be concluded, that if I had been in the same case, I should have been surprized into a like mistake.

that is meant the love of our neighbour, that charity, I say, can only take place, after a long and constant study of one self; a study, which alone can instruct us in equity.

This study suppresses in us the extreme inclination we all have to make use of unequal weights and scales, in the judgments which we form both of ourselves and others *. And who knows, but that the many acts of injustice, with which society has been disturbed, have their principle in these false judgments, and are owing to these deceitful scales †? This to me seems very probable.

I am likewise inclined to believe, that if men are still capable of listening to reason, of being brought back by any means to good; the only task to be prescribed to them, will be, not to be charitable, or to love their neighbour as themselves, but seriously to endeavour to become equitable.

* Upon the equity of our judgments depends the equity of our actions: the false esteem we have of ourselves, leads us to despise our neighbours; it is the standard of the value we put upon them. The more the scale sinks on one side, the more it rises on the other: and we find, that what makes it sink on our side, is commonly nothing valuable. It is nevertheless true, that we act according to this false judgment, and that our actions are tinged with it.

† All unjust actions proceed from thence. In effect, men differ not as to what is just or unjust in all evident cases wherein their interest is no way concerned. Why then can they not agree even in the most simple and plainest cases, when they are interested? the reason is, that they have for their neighbours very different weights, from those which they use for themselves.

L E T T E R XXXV.

A sort of tendernefs, of which men are fufceptible.

S I R,

YOU think that I fuppose men to be lefs capable of loving others, than they really are. I am in the wrong, without doubt, and I fhall be obliged to retract.

Let us make them amends; they are capable of loving, and of loving many things which relate to one thing only. They love all thofe to whom they are united, either by the ties of blood, or of intereft, or even by the relifh of pleafure. May not I fay, that they often love other men, in the fame manner as they love money, a fine country-feat, or a dignity? this would be too mean; let us judge of them more advantageoufly.

However, there are cafes, and thefe not very uncommon, wherein the lofs of a man, who might have procured us any of thefe advantages, gives us a very great and real affliction. On the other hand, there are cafes, wherein the lofs of a man, who is very dear to us, and who leaves us wherewithal to comfort ourfelves, wherein I fay this lofs desperately afflicts us; but this violent grief cannot be of long continuance, and foon gives place to comfort.— This fufficiently proves, that men are not incapable of tendernefs, and that I am miftaken in my judgments of them.

Could any thing justify me, it would be perhaps that several people are unwilling to confound that sort of tenderness with that love of our neighbour, which is called *charity*, and is recommended in the gospel. It is further true, that a tenderness of that sort is far from being universal, or extended to our neighbour in general, which may be the distinguishing property of charity; that tenderness, I say, is of such a nature, as to produce the quite contrary effect. Could one believe, that from thence usually proceeds that spirit of indifference, and even disdain, which is shewn to those with whom we have none of the above-mentioned ties. Let us say something more: the spirit of hatred or aversion, of sourness and rancour, and of resentment, has no other cause.

How can so great a fund of tenderness produce its reverse? it is thus. That kind of neighbour to whom we have no relation, is to us indifferent at least. If we suppose him to be of an abject condition, or to displease us in his outward appearance, he incurs our disdain. If we take some steps further, and suppose him to be capable of opposing us, of entering into competition, either with us, or with those who belong to us (for it is the same thing) this will be sufficient to stir up the passions: let them be what you please, aversion, hatred, resentment, no matter; they will still be the opposites of that pretended tenderness; and it will be no less true besides, that these very opposites are the effect of the passion, or passions, that are raised. Let this be granted.

This is what experience very readily allows. It is well enough known, that these men who are so affectionate to that little circle of people, with whom they are united, and of whom they are the center, consider all the rest of mankind with a kind of indifference,

which favours perhaps of disdain. Let us except however all those who dazzle them, either by their riches, or honours. We must not confound things : these persons are far from being the objects of indifference. The better to distinguish them, we need only bring them into the circle above-mentioned * ; it may be enlarged.

This, we must own, degrades a little that kind of tenderness ; and you may observe, that people of such a character are extremely well pleased with it ; they give to themselves freely and frankly the epithets of tender †, sympathizing, and perhaps generous : let us not deprive them of the pleasure they receive from it.

Now in what class shall we rank that other tender disposition which is called compassion or commiseration ‡ ? in one very different from the former. But what, shall we make it a virtue ? shall we call it charity ? neither, if you please ; it may however have its worth. If the question was to examine this, I should be for deferring the matter till to-morrow.

* This circle may be of great extent, with respect to a certain rank of people. To consider it in another light, we need only exclude from it all those who are not in condition to procure to other men any advantage whatever. Now, as there are in the meanest and lowest class of men, some from whom we may reap advantage, it follows that these must have a place in the circle, and that we should be greatly mistaken, if we supposed that it contained only the rich.

† It must however be owned, that these are more valuable than those people who are susceptible of tenderness.

‡ Commiseration ought to denote something more than bare compassion ; as will appear in the sequel.

LETTER XXXVI.

Of Compassion.

S I R,

I Know it is a common doctrine, that compassion is a natural disposition, which is of no great value *. It is true, some distinction may be made in this respect. I would not, however, be wholly of opinion that every disposition, purely natural, is on that single account of little value †.

To return to what they call compassion or commiseration, I agree that there are different kinds of it ‡. Of whatever nature it be, it is of great use in society, and concurs in its way to fulfil the intentions of the supreme Being. We must, however, own that it may be of such a nature, as to redound entirely to the advantage of those who are the objects of it §.

* There is some inconveniency in deerying too much what is called a natural disposition : that may aim even at the Author of nature, who hath placed nothing in man but what ought to be applied to some use.

† Equity is a natural disposition, to take it in a certain sense, because it is grounded on nature. It may be named *supernatural* in another sense, because it must be acquired, and cannot be acquired without great pains. In this sense it will be true, that men, formed as they are, are not naturally equitable.

‡ The difference between compassion and commiseration, is, that the former is an involuntary and momentaneous motion, by which we share in the troubles of another person : whereas commiseration is that constant and steady disposition, which makes us share in them voluntarily and freely, and engages us effectually to endeavour to relieve him. This disposition is no way different from what we call an equitable disposition.

§ And very little, or rather not at all to the advantage of him who exercises it; the reason of which will be seen below.

Let me explain myself. Of this kind I reckon that compassion, which is purely mechanical, which is neither a vice, nor a virtue. It is that which is excited by the presence of certain objects; that which moves in us certain springs, the motion of which makes us suffer, and gives us trouble. In such a case, nothing is more wanted than relief: and this is found very naturally, in our giving relief to the object of compassion.

It is easy to conclude, that the motion which induces us to it, is nothing different from that mechanical motion by which we rid ourselves of what incommodes us, or which makes us change our place, to sit more at ease.

It is therefore true, that such a disposition may be more advantageous to those who are the objects of it, than to him in whom it takes place: for to the former it procures assistance and relief; to the latter, it does neither good *, nor harm, and leaves him such as he was.

But might not this same disposition lead us to something better †? I think it might. Perhaps when

* At least it does him very little good; so far as it is confined to the relief which is mentioned. There is here, however, a very important remark to be made, viz. that they who go about to stifle in themselves that natural sentiment, who are obstinate against these impressions; I say, do themselves very much harm.

† This principle of sensibility, being well directed, ought to lead to something better; as the extinguishing of the same principle, leads from worse to worse those who have the misfortune to succeed in it. One step to that insensibility (for it must have its degrees) would be to withdraw our sight from all objects which are proper to move it. There are many people who are only come to this pitch of insensibility, it is not in their power not to be affected with the sight of the miserable, but they do what they can to remove it, and perhaps to shun the thoughts of them. This is a great step to

cultivated, it might leads us to another of great value, and that not only on account of the advantages which other people reap from it, but likewise on account of those which arise to the person in whom it should take place *. I mean by this, a beneficent disposition, an universal benevolence †, the object of which is human nature.

Wherein does this differ from the former ? in this, that is less mechanical, and may subsist independently of the objects which excite compassion. These objects, it is true, give it occasion to exercise itself, but they do not produce it ; the fund of it is independent of them. Might we not say that this fund, this benevolent disposition, belongs to the mind ; whereas compassion, such as it is defined, belongs to the constitution ? Both these, as we have said above, have their several uses : and a man who is hardly susceptible of

consummate hard-heartedness ; and the little sensibility which remains with them, (with which they are even pleased,) what name can it deserve ? *weakness of nature* ? they are hard-hearted in their wills, and are only mechanically sensible.

* It is essential to the nature of good, to be more advantageous to the subject in which it resides, than to those who know it only as it is reflected to them : this has been already observed elsewhere.

† This beneficent disposition, when it is real, has for its principle, a fund of goodness and equity. We see beings of the same origin and nature as ourselves, in a miserable condition, without having been able to deserve it : we are grieved to observe the disproportion there is between their condition and ours ; and thus we understand how just it is to do all that is in our power, to render their condition less rigorous. — Might we not make a remark here ; which seems to me very proper in this place ? it is this, that what they commonly call works of charity, or beneficence, are, if we take the matter right, no more than works of justice, and the necessary efforts of an equitable disposition.

that beneficent inclination, has need to be moved by compassion. And what do we know but that besides, this same compassion has need to be supported by some foreign assistance, perhaps by fame, by the fear of being deemed hard-hearted, or by the desire of passing for a generous or beneficent person *. It is true, that if compassion alone is of little value †, all these effects of it, which are of a foreign nature, will be of still less value; they must suppose a nature much degraded, much degenerated; since it is obliged to borrow elsewhere, what it ought to have found in its own stock.

But after all, if these assistances are necessary to several people, why should they be denied to them? If they are not very advantageous to these people, they may be so to others; some body will be bettered by them. ——— What morality, what fine charity is this! will some people say, without doubt. Well; but be not offended; we do not say that it is charity; something is wanting to make it so: but if there are in the world certain people, who are not capable of more charity, will you, in the mean time, forbid them to relieve also the distressed? for my own part,

* Jesus Christ alludes to these motives of a foreign nature, when he speaks of alms given with a view to procure esteem. These sinistrous views cover man with so much shame, that he dares not own them to himself; he feels all the meanness of them, and there is no need of inculcating it, to persuade him.

† Bare compassion, though mechanical, has nothing in it of falsity; it is a direct motion, which goes uniformly to its end: whereas that other manner of acting, goes to its end by side ways; a man seems to go to the right, and in reality he goes to the left; or in other words, he acts like a beneficent man, while in truth he has no other view but to seem to be so.

I should not be so rigid : I would only ask one thing of them ; which is to set the value upon their generosity *.

It is said, that to do alms is of no account, unless they are done in the sight of God : it is even pretended, that those alms which have compassion only for their principle, are of no value. Both those things may have their several meanings ; but they are liable to abuse ; for men, who are capable of nothing better, are thus reduced to this alternative ; either to forbear to do good, under pretence that they have not motives sufficiently good ; or to imagine that they have these motives, by often saying to themselves, that they ought to have them.

If they take the first course, the unhappy will suffer by it. If they resolve upon the second, the loss recoils upon them ; or, to speak more clearly, they put themselves out of reach of being ever brought back into the right way : for by imagining that they are charitable, and that too through good motives, they have nothing further to desire.

It therefore seems to me, that the affair may be considered in such a light, that nothing would be lost on either side. Are you incapable of being generous through noble motives ? no matter : be still generous : if it is out of mere compassion, there is nothing in that, which can hurt you. If it is out of a desire of gaining esteem, I own there is something of falsity in this. Try this expedient. The alms which you desired to give, give them unknown to any body. But if you have no longer an inclination to give them, when they will not be known, (for the only motive that induced you, was in that case the pleasure of

* There is beyond comparison, more to be hoped from people who should be in this case, than from those who should ascribe to themselves motives which they have not.

appearing charitable ;) I have nothing to say : give them however, from that motive, since you can have no other ; since, in short, if you forbear to give them, your principle of charity will suffer by it.

Other people would perhaps take a different course ; they might say that we need only add good motives to actions good in themselves : this, without doubt, would be very fine ; but I have some distrust of the possibility of the thing, and would be tempted to say, if it has not been already said, that motives of this sort are only tacked together.

One thing will perhaps be granted to me, viz. that such as is the fund, such are the acts. From hence it follows, that we cannot produce acts, but agreeably to the fund that is in us. This being supposed, how can you pretend that those men with whom self-love is predominant, who derive from thence their motives to the exercise of beneficence, in whom compassion alone would be too weak, without the assistance of fame ; how can you pretend, I say, that by a turn of the fancy, there shall be formed in them, another fund, opposite to the former, from whence they may likewise derive acts of another nature ? but this may lead us to useless repetitions. It has been sufficiently demonstrated, that it is in vain to force nature. But enough of this subject.

Let us only conclude from hence, that it were to be wished, that every person could discern and distinguish in himself those acts which are only good in their form, from those which are good in the fund that produces them. It might happen, that by such a discernment, things would change their names * ; but they would

* We might likewise conclude, that if men were come to this point, there would be no inconveniency in this, that

not change their nature: and when all matters are duly considered, more would be got than be lost by it.

LETTER XXXVII.

Of what they call good characters.

S I R,

YOU desire that we should return to speak of that beneficent disposition, that universal benevolence, which we have mentioned, as it were, only by the way.

—It is certainly a vast subject, and I shall not exhaust it. Here again several distinctions are to be made. How great a resemblance may there not be in certain effects, whose cause is very different!

We find among men a great many of those characters which are called beneficent, and are officious, inclined to oblige, incapable of giving a refusal, and of an excessive complacency. These characters may have their value; at least they are always advantageous to society: it were to be wished that there were more characters of this kind than any other.

It is nevertheless equally true, that persons of such characters are very apt to deceive, not only others, but even themselves*: they are seen, and they see themselves in so favourable a light, that it is possible the satisfaction they receive from thence, may be the great spring of their goodness and generosity. It must be agreed, that goodness and generosity are amiable qualities, and generally esteemed; but nothing is more common, than to be mistaken concerning them.

every person should discharge every duty which is outwardly good and agreeable to order.

* In this last case the deception is most to be feared.

There are some persons, in whom goodness, after the same manner as compassion, is nothing but a weakness ; people who cannot refuse any thing, because they have not the strength to do it *, or because they cannot discern when a refusal would be proper and when not †. This want of discernment, or the fixing upon a very limited point of view, is another cause of the goodness of several persons. People of this stamp, who ordinarily agree in opinion with all mankind ‡ ; who think every thing to be very good and very fine, who judge of every thing charitably § ; who express an esteem for another person upon very slight grounds ; these people have a goodness of character

* They are not displeased to find people who refuse for them ; from hence we may judge of the value that ought to be put upon their readiness to do good offices.

† There are such occasions wherein a refusal would be much more advantageous even to those who require certain services, than a mean complaisance to grant every thing.

‡ To agree in opinion with all mankind, is to be of both sides of a question ; it is necessarily to acquiesce in many falsehoods.

§ A manner of expression, which signifies to judge blind-fold ; it would be to very little purpose to undeceive several people, with regard to this ; you would offend them in good earnest. What ! is it not better to judge in a good than in a bad sense ? I beg we may understand one another. Either you know perfectly well the thing concerning which a judgment is to be made ; or you have only a confused idea of it. If you are in the latter case, you are an incompetent judge ; suspend your judgment, till you are more fully informed. If you are in the former case, is it sincerely in your power to judge according to your own pleasure ? is it for you to make the balance incline to one side more than to another ? from hence I conclude, that no kind of judgment ought to be made, till we have considered each side of the question, and that every judgment ought to be founded, not on what is called charity, but upon equity itself.

which is admitted ; these are the good honest souls with whom we do whatever we please, and who deny us nothing.

What shall we think of generosity ? let us here make a distinction. Several people confound liberality with generosity *, though these things are very different. The present question is about liberality ; it is that which comes more within the reach of man, and which he is in a condition to practise †. As for generosity, I know not well where to place it : I am even inclined to doubt whether there is any real generosity among men ; at least the examples of it are so scarce, that they cannot make a general rule.

Let us return to liberality ; it may have different causes. What is true, is, that the liberality which is most valued among men, is not of the right sort : and in this respect, they are no less deceived, than with regard to goodness : it may even be true, that what

* As generosity has in it something more grand than bare liberality, men being always in love with what is great and beautiful, make use of the former expression on a thousand occasions, where the latter would be much properer : nay, they apply it in certain cases where true liberality has no share. This will be made plainer in the sequel.

† Liberality consists in giving to others a part of our superfluities, and that without much incommoding ourselves. The generous man goes farther ; he parts with things which are dear to him, he does good at his own cost. Add to this, a kind of disinterestedness ; suppose that he acts without being able to expect a reciprocal favour, without reaping any applauses, and perhaps unknown to the objects of his generosity. If you join those marks together, you will have some idea of generosity, and may judge from thence, whether it is a very common quality.

they take for liberality *, is only the effect of that pretended goodness †.

Moralists have long since made this remark, that *virtues when carried to an excess, degenerate into vices*: from thence they have concluded, that in all things we must keep within certain bounds, that perfection lies in keeping a medium. But how is this medium to be pointed out? this would give employment to the casuists, and I doubt whether in this point they would ever agree. What would be a medium, with some of them, would be carrying things to an extreme with others ‡. It would be in vain to tell me again and again; *keep a medium*, I will not give up any thing, and you teach me nothing by that. What I require of you, is to shew it distinctly to me, to give me a fixed rule, by which I may discern, whether I am near, or far from it.

If any one should think fit to answer, that the medium consists in avoiding the extremes, I ask nothing more; I know once for all, that a medium consists in keeping a medium. — But why should we seek this medium at so great a distance? we will find it, me-

* The giving to others a part of our superfluities, is not always the effect of true liberality; it is sometimes joining one superfluity with another, and what is called, *returning the ball to ourselves*. We may likewise safely venture to say, that it is *being liberal to one's self*.

† From hence we may judge of the value of this kind of goodness. The nature of goodness is, to produce good effects, and to procure some real good to those who are the objects of it. Now this kind of liberality is often more hurtful than advantageous both to him who exerts it, and to him who receives it.

‡ This needs not be proved. The diversity of employments, and the diversity of characters, must occasion, in this respect, an infinite variety.

thinks, in that same equitable disposition which we have mentioned more than once ; or at least this disposition will be the measure and fixed rule, by which we may discern at what distance we are from it.

I am even very much inclined to think, that it is impossible to find any other. In effect, all these rules in morality, by which it is pretended to point out to me how far goodness may go, without degenerating into weakness, how far firmness and constancy may be carried, without degenerating into rigour and hard-heartedness ; all these rules which I approve of in speculation, are of no use to me in practice,

The reason of it is this ; that it is very possible I may apply them wrong ; that I may give the name of goodness, to what at bottom is only weakness ; that I may call firmness what is mere obstinacy. Now, I pray you, tell me, whether in such a case, all the finest rules in the world would be capable to correct me. I would admit them all, and find them just and most reasonable. Perhaps you fancy I am now close beset, and that I cannot escape. Give yourself no pain for me, I shall get off very easily : for I shall be able to persuade myself, that I very exactly observe these same rules, that my conduct is entirely conformable to them. From hence it is easy to judge of the benefit I receive from them.

But may not this same inconveniency, you will here say, take place with regard to what you call an equitable disposition ? I answer, that if by this you mean bare definitions of an equitable disposition ; I most willingly grant you, that the same inconveniency may take place in it ; and for this reason ; because it is very easy for a man who mistakes himself to come to fancy that he is equitable, when he is far from being so : if by this you mean the reality of that same dis-

position, I answer, that this last sense is very different from the former.

Our last remark on this subject was, that the only way to attain an equitable disposition, is the study of one's self; a study whereby we discern within our own breasts the different causes of the acts which we produce, and whereby we are enabled to give to every thing its just value, and proper name.

Now, I pray you, tell me, whether a man, who is in this case, would be incapable of passing a sound judgment on what might offer to him: or if you know any way more proper for enabling him to do this, pray tell it, we ask no more.

In the mean while, I think I have a right to conclude, that a man, who is accustomed to read and know himself, will not be the dupe of these pretended virtues, which, when carried to an excess, degenerate into vices.

This is the place for a remark which I might have made sooner, viz. that those virtues, whose excess may become vicious, are not of the same stamp with true and genuine virtue. The reason of it is, that the principle of every real virtue is one and the same. Now I ask, whether the effects proceeding from the same principle, can oppose and destroy each other; and whether that which is essentially good in its cause, can become vicious, and hurtful in its effects?

This will be put beyond all doubt, as soon as we admit of this principle, which has been already laid down, viz. *That there is no real virtue independent of equity; that an equitable disposition ought to be the measure and undoubted rule of a just discernment, with respect to every thing that is called virtue.*

Another remark will not be improper here, viz. that the same moralists who have supposed, that vir-

tues, when carried to an excess, may become vices, these moralists, I say, have never thought fit to suppose an excess in that virtue, which alone has no vicious extremes, and to which it is unnecessary to prescribe limits. This, in short, is the medium, the very medium, which is so much inquired after, without being found, because it is sought where it is not.

This brings to my mind a remark, which has been made elsewhere *, viz. that if we consider things in their root, or principle, it will not be necessary to propose a multitude of them; for this would only tend to exhaust and divide our attention.

But I am here departing from my subject: I forget that the question is about goodness and liberality. These two beneficent qualities, we have already said, may be carried too far: but it is not so; this is only the vulgar opinion; for in this case, they would be no longer beneficent, they would be hurtful. For every kind of goodness, and every kind of liberality, which is not essentially founded on a principle of equity, cannot essentially be beneficent †: it must only be superficial, I may freely say, accidental, divers foreign circumstances contribute to it, and determine the degree of it ‡.

This is the cause why persons of this character are very unlike to themselves upon several occasions, and are entirely unaccountable §. View them on a certain

* Letter twenty fourth.

† If this kind of goodness, or of liberality, tends to flatter, or to feed the passions, it is plain the effects of it are pernicious.

‡ One would be surprized to see how little there is in this kind of goodness.

§ What proceeds from different causes, and from such as are accidental, can neither be steady nor uniform.

side, and you will find they have a nobleness of soul, and are liberal ; you will judge that there is nothing defective about them. View them on another side, and you will find they have a littleness of mind, are attached to trifles, are covetous ; in short, that they discover the very reverse of that liberality, with which you had judged they were endowed. Examples of this sort are very common, and strike us every day : what is least thought of, is, that we ought to go back to the cause of them.

This cause, as we have already said, is nothing but a defect of a principle really existing in man. It varies no less than the different circumstances which determine it. Can we be surprized, if the effects are unlike, when contraries meet in the cause or principle ?

We might observe something more uniform, was it possible to follow closely, and narrowly examine a man truly beneficent, a man whose liberality was determined by a principle of equity. But, perhaps, it would not be an easy matter to put a due value on the steps taken by such a man ; they would perhaps seem to be so common, so ordinary, that nothing valuable would be found in them, nothing to claim any attention *.

Let us say something more. It may very easily happen, that a man of this character would seem to be far less liberal, nay, far less generous than that other, whose qualities are only superficial and accidental, and in their fund and principle, are void of reality.

* This confirms what has been already advanced, viz. that nothing makes a less shining figure or sets one off less than an equitable disposition. See letter thirty second.

LETTER XXXVIII.

Of liberality.

S I R,

YOU are not satisfied : you desire to explain myself more at length upon the article, with which my letter concludes. This indeed seems to me to be hardly practicable. The question here is not to explain a subject of a speculative nature, whose principles are evident, and whose consequences are clear. What you require is a very different thing. The question is to explain, and to penetrate even into man, who can only be known to God and himself.

In effect, let us suppose that same man, whom we have mentioned, that beneficent person, whose conduct is governed by equity, what has he (to judge of him only by his outside) that can distinguish him from the other man, who at bottom is of a quite different character ? Perhaps, you will find a hundred opportunities, wherein the latter shall shew more readiness to be liberal, and even generous *, whereip he shall well acquit himself, and spend *à propos*, with a certain ease and freedom, which will give you an idea of his having an excellent fund of generosity. You will perhaps find in the other, the appearances of a close-fisted man †, who seems to spend with reluc-

* What is called *generous* ; for we do not fail to give this epithet to every man who knows how to spend his fortune in a genteel way, and to do himself a credit by it.

† Circumspection very well becomes a man, who considers himself not as the proprietor of his superfluities, but barely as the distributor of them. This being supposed,

tance, who is wanting in that ease and readiness *, which argues a noble mind, and which we commonly say, is knowing how to make a right use of one's fortune.

This is not all. It may happen, that on several of those opportunities which are called those for charity and beneficence †, the latter will do much less than the former; and that too considering the due proportion of their respective fortunes. Now, I pray you, tell me, whether I who am a mere spectator of the conduct of these two persons, and who have not so prying eyes, as to see into the principle of their actions, would not be naturally inclined to give the preference to him whose outside and appearances struck

nothing is more just, or more reasonable, than to examine with care, whether we employ them in such a manner, as is conform to the intentions of the supreme Dispenser of all things.

* This, however, is delicate, and perhaps the man who should be much pleased with himself for resembling this picture, well deserves to be ranked among the covetous. One moment, if you please; would you see, whether the likeness is real? observe, that this man, who is circumspect in point of liberality, will never be so, but on such occasions where there are just reasons to fear, that liberality may produce a hurtful effect. But in every other occasion, where he can only presume that liberality will be well timed, and proper, take particular notice of it, you will find him far from being a niggard; he will then be liberal and generous, with great readiness and ease.

† Splendid opportunities, which give those who embrace them, room to signalize and shew themselves, and yet often do not remedy the most pressing evil. A man truly equitable is upon his guard against these showy opportunities: he willingly gives place to those who are determined to their liberality by this very circumstance: on the other hand, he turns his care to those who deserve it better, and whose obscurity protects him from all hazard of applause.

me most? how would you have me divine, that this man, liberal at bottom, but seemingly niggard, is only sparing of his expence upon such occasions, because he is guided by equity? can I divine, that it is this same principle, which moderates his expences upon those occasions of beneficence, where it looks so well to be profuse; that the moderation which he observes, and which others would call niggardliness, has no other cause, or principle, than an equitable disposition?

You must agree, that God alone, and the man himself, whom we here suppose, can penetrate so far: but after all, may not this same man be mistaken, and imagine, that what governs him, and bounds his liberalities, is nothing but equity itself, while at bottom he may be governed by nothing but a secret avarice?

This, without doubt, is a very delicate matter, and very liable to mistakes. Let us however explain ourselves. If you understand by this man one of a supple, pliable character, who has acquired a habit or having motives at hand, I own, that a man of this stamp, may easily be mistaken. But if the question here is about a man, whose character is unfeigned and simple, who has never recourse to falsity, to supply what he wants, who is accustomed to see in himself what is defective or wrong, without going about to disguise it; who endeavours, I say, to remove it, and not conceal it*: it is very certain, that such a man, (if there are any of this stamp) will not be mistaken, but will very easily discern the principle of his actions. Observe, I do not pretend to suppose, that a man, such as I have represented him, is in that alone

* A picture of which it is a hard matter to find originals.

entirely free from every principle of avarice : but I repeat it once more, he cannot be duped by it *.

To take the matter right, avarice is very different from the idea that is commonly formed of it ; the cause of it is little known, and I know not if there is any one man in whom that cause does prevail more or less. May not this cause be at bottom that principle of avidity, which every man naturally has for every thing that appears to him a good : an avidity, which inclines him to secure it to himself for the future ; and makes him fear lest by sharing that good with another person, he should at last be deprived of it ?

This principle of avidity is diversified to an infinite degree, and manifests itself outwardly by the most opposite effects. The reason of this is, that some consider that to be a good, which does not appear as such to others.

This good, in the eyes of some, consists in heaps of gold ; to this pretended good, they sacrifice all other satisfactions ; for this they deny themselves all the enjoyments and even sometimes the necessaries of life.

* A man inwardly plain and simple, well knows the different springs of his actions. All his motions are direct, and plainly point at the cause which produces them. If that cause was avarice, he could not mistake it, much less mistake it for what is its very opposite, for equity itself. Denials, which proceed from a principle of avarice, are very easily known : they have in them I know not what confusion and perplexity, which one goes about to justify by reasons that come too late. On the other hand, those which proceed from an equitable disposition, have in them something determined, something clear, and clean (for I know not how to express myself) which stands not in need of being justified, and rejects all sorts of pretence. A denial, which far from giving any trouble to the mind, gives it only a calmness, composure and serenity.

Others annex the idea of good to that of pleasure; this is the object of their avidity. By a necessary consequence, they are also eagerly desirous of what may procure pleasure to them. From hence it is easy to conclude, that gold is not to them a thing indifferent, that they are no less eager than others in the pursuit of the metal; and it is also true, that they can never have enough of it.

If there is any difference between the avarice of these and that of the former, it is, that the latter is less extravagant, and considers gold only as a means proper for procuring certain satisfactions; whereas the former makes gold its object, and sole end.

Let us own, that this extravagant and mad desire is as much despised as it deserves to be. Misers of this kind are every where the objects of public ridicule; and they accordingly make but an inconsiderable number. Those who are eagerly desirous of pleasure, (let us join with them such as are eagerly desirous of dignities) are incomparably more numerous.

People of this kind, who, as we have already observed, are not less greedy of gain than the former, with what eye do you think they consider them, what epithets do they not give them? let us grant them, that they are partly in the right, and they have too much sense to render themselves ridiculous. Shall we likewise grant them, that this avidity after gain, is nothing like what is called *avarice*? I cannot well tell, let us leave them to determine it.

One thing in which I find they are like to the former is, that they take great care to keep for themselves,* what they might share among others, without doing

* Some keep gold for its own sake; others keep it for several uses.

themselves any prejudice.—One might believe that what renders avarice more common, is, that men do not derive their good from inexhaustible sources. In effect, what would it cost them to be generous, if they had no reason to fear that the source should come to be drained. It is true, this cause is real to several people; and even pretty much excuses those whose condition is so limited, and whose superfluities are so moderate, that they have hardly more than necessaries.

But it is likewise true, that this same cause does not take place with respect to a very great number of people. The proof of this is, that when they sacrifice with profuseness, both for pomp, and for pleasure, they do it without any fear that the source should come to be drained: they know that their fortunes are affluent, and that therefore they may husband them as little as they please.

But when they sacrifice with so much ease, with an air of generosity, in a grand noble manner, are they excited to it by generosity, or even by a principle of liberality? this is doubtful. Would you have this proved? furnish them with an opportunity of exercising it upon objects of pity; I do not suppose that they would refuse to exercise it; they would willingly embrace the opportunity*. Perhaps you would perceive for all this, that there is not so much ease in this case, as in others, and that the grand and noble air disappears†. As for the proportion to be ob-

* It is even a kind of ease for a man to be warranted thus in denying himself nothing.

† What a prodigious difference appears! here we perceive, that a certain coldness seizes upon that generous man; that this coldness succeeds to that air of eagerness.

served, that is not the matter in hand *. Liberalities of this kind ought to be viewed, as it were through a microscope †.

When all things are duly considered, there is no comparison to be made here. What we part with on our own account, is nothing; what we part with on account of another person, is to be valued ‡.

and satisfaction, to that engaging manner, by which he seemed to prevent even the desires of those whom he intended to oblige. The reason is, that this neighbour, who is proposed to him, as an object of his charity, is of a very different kind from him who is the object of his profuseness.

* The idea of proportion is born with man; it is inseparable from the idea of equity: all men, and even children are offended with what they perceive to be disproportioned: there are a thousand cases in life, wherein they can make use of this principle: there are some on the other hand, wherein one would judge that they have no idea of proportion; and that they quite mistake it: the case which is here mentioned is of this number.

† Perhaps we must retract this assertion; men always preserve the idea of proportion: for by the help of the microscope, a fly appears to them to be of an immense size.

‡ This sets in its full light the cause of the difference which is to be made here. And another reason, which must not be omitted, is, that these two kinds of liberality, (if one may give them such a name) necessarily come into competition with each other: the thing is very evident: however opulent you suppose a man, his wealth is still limited; and the more he spends one way, the less must he spend another. — From hence, one might conclude, that they who run headlong into a taste of profuseness, which they call *generosity*, do hereby bring themselves to an inevitable necessity of being really covetous.

I conclude, that true liberality is much rarer than is imagined * ; that if we sometimes happen not to discover it where it is, we must oftner suppose it where it is not.

L E T T E R XXXIX.

S I R,

I Most willingly grant you, that it is much easier to give a definition of the false kind of goodness, and of the false kind of liberality, than of the true ; and you may observe, that this holds true in several other cases. For that which is false or wrong, is in every kind of subject what offers itself first to our view : as it may proceed from several causes, it is very much diversified, it offers a circumference of great compass, wherein we may find abundance of

* One of the foundations of true liberality would be, to have an habit of considering men as members of one and the same family, as children of the same father. Some as younger sons, would have little or nothing in their management. Others, as elder brothers, would have the care of improving the funds, and of providing for the subsistence of their brothers. — From hence they, who act the part of their elder brothers, ought to consider the proportion or disproportion which they make between their brothers and themselves ; and thus they may judge of the justice or injustice of their conduct. — We may likewise conclude, that it is a great mistake, to imagine, that liberality, even when it is well applied, is very commendable, and that we in that case do something more than our duty. It is perfectly evident, to consider the matter in this point of view, (as we observed in letter thirty sixth) that what they call *works of beneficence*, are in truth nothing but acts of justice, which perhaps fall very much short of what equity may require.

matter for our entertainment. That which is true, is of a very different nature. The question is to define it, both in its principle and effects : with respect to the last it escapes your researches * : the reason is, that these effects are of a doubtful nature, and may proceed from what is false, as well as from what is true.

We thus find ourselves obliged to leave the effects just as we found them, and to go back to their cause : but this cause again, affords very little matter for definitions. It is of so simple a nature, so undivided and uniform in its kind, that it offers no diversity. All we know of it is expressed in two words, which we are always obliged to repeat : and can any thing be more tiresome than this ? there would therefore be no reason to be surprized, that you should be somewhat tired to hear the same principles eternally repeated. What ! the same thing over and over. An equitable disposition ; the study of one's self the only way of attaining it. What further ? nothing ; if at least the question is to go to the bottom of the matter, and to go to the principles. Or if you would have different expressions, I will speak to you of sincerity, and of sincerity towards ourselves. Would you have any thing further ? I have done : for if you still ask me, how far sincerity may lead us, I have no other answer to make but this, that it necessarily leads us to become equitable. If this does not satisfy you, ought I not to conclude, that having nothing more satisfactory to say, it is time for me to be silent. The conclusion is very natural, and I doubt whether it will be an easy matter for you to oppose it.

* This has been observed several times before : that effect which you define, and which may proceed from real virtue, may likewise proceed from some imaginary one.

You are going to reply to me, that I have left several things untouched, or at least several which require to be better explained. I readily grant it : but you will likewise grant to me, that the principles of them are laid down ; nay, perhaps you will grant me, that there is no subject belonging to the essential religion, which has not its foundation in these same principles. If you do not fully agree to this, I am willing we should make a trial of it, upon whatever subject you please.

L E T T E R X L.

S I R,

YOU take me at my word, and I find there is no going back. Well then ; what subject shall we begin with ? would you have one of a speculative kind ; is the question about some object of faith ? we shall find the foundation of it in that principle of sincerity, which we have considered as the sole basis of faith. That principle makes us acquiesce in every truth, in a manner proportioned to the evidence we discover in it : it makes us suspend our judgment, as to what is discovered to us only by halves : it leads us to reverence what seems to us to be divine in its origine, though it should be impossible for us to penetrate into the true sense of it.

Now, I pray you, tell me, whether there is any object of faith, that is not comprehended in one or other of these classes ? — You will find in the first, all the primitive truths, which are clear and evident in themselves, and to which the understanding cannot refuse its assent. In the second class, you will find the gospel-truths, the end and use of which is but imperfectly discovered to us : and in the third, you will

find those doctrines and mysteries which border upon the incomprehensible, and which it becomes men, not to sift and pry into, but to reverence and esteem.

Would you have us pass from hence to some matter of practice? with all my heart; let us chuse whatever matter you please. — Shall it be what they call *duties to God*? I first observe, that faith will be here included: now we have just seen it entirely established. Let us pass to some other matter. Here may *hope* be mentioned. You will doubtless stop me short, to make me observe, that I have not made the least mention of this subject *. In effect, I must have been guilty of great forgetfulness; and this omission is not to be excused.

Let us however consider this matter right: perhaps omitting the word, is not omitting the thing. Might not one find the foundation of hope in these very objects of faith, which we have been reciting? It will be found exactly in the same class, viz. that of primitive truths, or to use other expressions, in the indubitable principle of the self-sufficient Being. Let us add to this principle all the consequences which it necessarily includes, and we shall have the idea of the true foundation of hope.

This would appear unquestionable, if it was fit to repeat in this place what we have said above †, concerning what the self-sufficient Being would be with respect to men, and concerning the end to which he

* To make hope a duty or a virtue, would appear very strange, were we not accustomed to consider that as such, I am much inclined to suppose, that it is as little in the power of a man to hope, as to love, or believe as he is commanded. Notwithstanding this, we may examine the principle of hope, as will appear below.

† See letters sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth.

would bring them.—Now I desire to know, whether hope can rest upon any basis more immoveable, or more solid, than nature itself, and the declared intentions * of the common father of all men ?

What shall we make succeed to hope ? a fine question truly ! charity without doubt. But I know not whether we can say any thing new concerning it, whether we consider it, as merely signifying the love of our neighbour ; or whether we include in it the love of God, or, in short, whether we take it as denoting commiseration. Have we, I say once more, any thing of importance to explain concerning any of these senses, put upon the word *charity* ? It must be answered in the affirmative, if the business was to describe the different effects, and to draw all the marks of charity. But, as I have already said, this is what I do not attempt : the undertaking would not only be too difficult, but likewise too unsure †. I keep to such principles, as are unquestionable and not liable to mistake.

Are you not yet satisfied ? must we again seek for some practical subject, independent of the former ? methinks I can settle the matter, by giving you an authority which you cannot refuse, viz. that *charity is the fulfilling of the law*.

In effect, if you include in that idea, the love of God, and of our neighbour, it follows, that all the duties we owe to both are comprehended in it ‡.

* If by these declared intentions is meant the absolute design he has formed to make all men happy, we may judge from thence of the solidity of that hope.

† It is unsure, for the reasons assigned above. See letter thirty ninth.

‡ And if we here call to mind whatever has been said concerning equity, as the sole way that leads to true charity, I doubt if we can imagine any duty that does not wholly depend upon it.

What will therefore remain with regard to practice? a fine question this: here is another considerable omission. There remain the duties towards ourselves. — This is certainly inexcusable. But let us see; can I find nothing here to justify me? I have said nothing of temperance; not one word: this cannot be answered. — But would it be a very hard matter to demonstrate, that the principles of it are all established; and perhaps not less solidly, than if the expression was there to be met with. I ask therefore, of what use can all the gospel counsels be, which we have so fully spoke of*; that application to curb and suppress in ourselves the relish of false pleasures, of pomp, and effeminacy?

Let us stop here. and forbear to repeat what it is easier to peruse again.

When all things are well considered, if we would tell what is the true foundation of whatever are called duties to ourselves, we are again reduced to the hazard of tiring you, and obliged to repeat what we said before: the question, I say, will be about sincerity†: I can discover no other foundation of these duties.

But what! will you say, can sincerity be sufficient for every thing, for our duties to God, to our neighbour, and to ourselves? This appears very possible

* See letters eighth, and following, to letter twelfth inclusively.

† Temperance, which is considered as comprising all they call *duties to ourselves*, is only the effect, or a consequence of it. To take the matter right, it will be found, that the first of all the duties we owe to ourselves, ought to consist in giving room in our minds for all the impressions of truth. It is in consequence of this disposition, that we are led to the practice of real temperance.

to me ; and besides, the truth is, that sincerity towards ourselves is the introduction to all the rest : if we are wanting in this point, every other kind of sincerity will be suspicious.

In effect it is very evident, that a man who deceives himself, will not be very nice, with respect to his neighbour ; and that a man who contents himself with vain pretences, and frivolous reasons, will very naturally think them good enough for other people.

May this want of sincerity take place, with regard to the Deity ? it might, if it was possible to deceive him * : but as it is unquestionable, that the Deity cannot be deceived, it follows, that the deception recoils entirely upon the subject from whom it proceeds ; and it is he alone who suffers by it. Let us say something farther. If he has succeeded in deceiving his neighbour, even in this case, it is he alone who bears the weight of it ; here the effect returns into, and affects its cause.

You may now observe, that this leads me to conclude exactly with what I began. Whatever they call *duties of man*, which are divided into different classes, do all when narrowly considered, melt, as it were, into one another. They are reduced to one †,

* It is not owing to several people, that this does not happen. They say such fine things to God almighty, they express such admirable sentiments, that if he did not see through them, he could not help being deceived.

† This leads us to observe, that the religion essential to man is in itself so simple, so much one, if we may be allowed the expression, that the divisions and subdivisions, by which they pretend to distinguish and mark it out, are of very little use. Let us say something more ; they contribute very much to disguise it, and to shew it for what it is not.

both in their effects and their cause. The principles of them are found in man ; to him they bear a relation ; they relate, I say, to his advantage ; they tend to procure him good, and that happiness for which he was made *.

* Let me have leave to recollect here, or rather to transcribe, what makes the conclusion of the first letter.

" Cannot we conclude from hence, (*from the principle of a self-sufficient Being*) that since God does nothing for his own advantage, he has no other view but the advantage of his creatures ; that whatever is called religion is reduced to this ; that every other idea of religion, far from honouring God, really dishonours him ; that at least it supposes him to be like unto men, who in consequence of their insufficiency, cannot be perfectly disinterested. It is therefore evident, that the principle of a self-sufficient Being, far from ruining religion, is the real basis of it ; far from destroying morality, comprehends the strongest motives to it.

" To take men on the side of interest, is touching them in the most sensible part ; every other motive must give place to that. Talk to them of duty, justice, or gratitude, they take these to be very fine things, and their understanding approves of them. But when the question is to put them in practice, to sacrifice something to what they have owned to be fine and commendable, they are drawn by an almost invincible inclination to prefer their advantage, or at least what appears to them as such, to the things which justice may require.

" This therefore would be the essential point, to make men sensible that what is called justice, duty, etc. no way differs from their real interests ; that there is even an essential relation between one and the other ; that it is, only on account of this relation, that duty, justice, etc. are required of them ; that the self sufficient Being having no need of his creatures, has, in what we call religion, no other interest in view but theirs, no other aim but that of making them happy, which was the sole design

of his creating them. Perhaps, if we could once convince men of this truth, they would readily assent to every other.

"It is amazing to see the strange contradiction there is between what men believe and how they act; from whence it is concluded, that to believe and to act are two different things. They are not so different as one would think. Men, capricious as they are, act more consistently than we imagine: I add, in what nearly concerns them, and when they are well persuaded of it. This will pass for a paradox, but it would not be impossible to prove it."

End of the Essential RELIGION.

R E M A R K S

Relating to the foregoing LETTERS.

WHAT a strange contrariety there is in the conduct of man ! religion, when considered in its simplicity, charms him as soon as ever he perceives it. The unity of its principles, the harmony of its consequences ; the great end proposed by the author of it ; all these marks offer to his understanding, the idea of an origin truly divine * ; he cannot mistake the cause of it.

He hardly takes a few steps in this path, which is found quite plain and smooth, when he turns back to look behind him : something is wanting to him ; he believes he has wandered out of the way : he asks himself, what is become of all those stones and briars, which he was wont to meet with in his way † ? he no longer knows where he is : he forgets that those stones and briars were purposely removed to make a path for him, and to render it easier : he seriously resolves to go back in quest of them, and to restore them to their former places.

* It is one of the marks of truth, to produce its effects at the first attempt, when it is considered singly, by itself ; before we have had time to measure it with uncertain measures.

† We were so much accustomed to find them there, that we at last mistook them for the road itself ; and judged them to be inseparable from it. See letter twenty seventh.

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Let us carry the metaphor no farther ; the application of it is at hand. A religion that is too simple, too plain, does not charm us long ; it soon becomes suspicious. We put this question to ourselves, what would become, in this case, of the many particular opinions, which we judged inseparable from it * ? We do not stop here ; but we call to our assistance the antiquity of these opinions, the consent which a multitude of people have given to them † : this is sufficient to reinstate them, as being essential to religion. — It is true, these particular opinions have at all times set Christians at variance with one another ; have rent and mangled christianity, and disfigured religion ; have furnished its enemies with a pretence to consider it as the source of discord, and to impute to it all the mischiefs which the spirit of disputation and controversy has produced. — No matter for all this ; let these opinions make religion ever so odious, let them disguise it ever so much, they are essential to it. — It is true, an attachment to opinions of this kind, runs directly counter to the end of religion. This end should be to render men good, peaceable, moderate, capable of impartiality, and truly equitable. Now, it must be granted, that such an

* This is exactly the case of a Roman catholic, and in this he acts consistently, he follows his principles. Whatever assent he at first gave to the general truths, whose evidence and harmony struck him, he soon returns to himself, he asks what would, in that case, become of the authority of the church, the sacrifice of the mass, etc? is any thing further wanting, to make him conclude, that he must stop here?

† The antiquity and consent of the great number, are likewise among those titles upon which the Roman catholics ground themselves.

attachment produces quite contrary effects, and withdraws and misleads men from that end, by amusing them with vain speculations.——No matter yet. Let such a multitude of contrary opinions destroy religion as much as you please; I am still unshaken in this my opinion, that they are essential to it. Now, is not this a very decisive and just conclusion? it is certainly unanswerable; what reason can we offer to people who are persuaded, because they are persuaded, to people who can admit at the same time of the most contradictory opinions, and who would make no scruple, if they were forced to take their option, to renounce evidence, rather than to lay aside their old opinions, opinions which they had adapted, without knowing any reason for them.——But this I deny, they know the reason for which they adapted them: viz. that from their infancy they have been told these opinions are true: that in the society of which they are members, they are so generally received, that a man must be very bold to call them into question*.

These are convincing reasons, and are indeed, more than sufficient to persuade every man, that the alcoran is of a divine original and institution, if he has been told so from his infancy†.

* It follows, that they who are members of the other Christian societies, and who from their infancy have imbibed prejudices, or opposite opinions, would be much in the wrong to call them into question.

† Let us do ourselves justice. For what reason are we Christians, and not Mahometans? is it not because we are born in one climate, and not in another? and for what reason are we engaged in one part of christianity, rather than in another that is contrary to it? would we not have been as zealous Roman catholics, as we are zealous protestants, if we had been educated by the former?——For the rest, this ought to give no occasion for confounding

It must be agreed, after this, that a religion, such as has been represented in these letters, cannot be fit for all mankind, that it can only be relished by very few people, by those only who can lay aside every thing that is mere prejudice, every thing they have adopted only in imitation of other men; by those only who dare go back to the principles of things, consider truth in its origin, independently of what others may think, and of what they themselves have thought; they, in short, who are willing to put the thing in the worst case, to run the hazard of being obliged to contradict themselves, in what they had advanced, to own that they were mistaken, or at least that they had considered those opinions as essential to religion, which are foreign to it:—Such persons as these will easily discover the cause of their mistake.

“ They had made words the rule and standard of truth, instead of acknowledging truth as the sole rule by which the sense of words is to be determined*.”

Upon examining this matter, we shall find that all the controversies about the different senses of scripture, arise from no other cause; for it is evident, that the design of these controversies is not to call in question, whether the scripture speaks truth; the truth with falsehood; it does not conclude in supposing that one of these religions, or parties of religion, carries more evidence with it than the other. The whole tenour of the work proves the contrary. We would only have it observed, that the same reasons which have made several people adopt many opinions they warmly maintain; these reasons, I say, would have made them receive in like manner the alcoran; and that they would have maintained it with equal zeal, had they been born Mahometans.

* See the third letter, concerning the Deist, at the end of the sequel of the fourteen letters.

generality of Christians make no doubt of it. The dispute is only about the sense, or, to speak more properly, they contest only about the contradiction of the different senses which are put upon it; and every man only pretends to make his own sense pass, and prevail over all others.

After what has been said, we can hardly conceive how the particular explanations which people have been pleased to give to obscure and ambiguous expressions, which of themselves determine nothing; how these explanations, I say, would come to be considered as essential to religion, or pass for any thing more than opinions.

* "One of these things must be true; either the scripture speaks clearly, or it speaks obscurely. If clearly (I say clearly to me, for a thing may be evident to one man, which appears obscure to another) I have no need of an interpreter†, nor have I need that any man should determine instead of scripture, concerning what it says. If it speaks obscurely, I ask, why should I believe that you who explain it to me, and decide concerning what

* [We here insert, with some alterations, a fragment taken from an answer we made in the year 1734, to an anonymous divine, concerning some objections he had started against some principles of the book of the fourteen letters.

† This being supposed, may they say, all divines will be useless. We do not mean this: the question here is only about interpretations concerning things obscure and impenetrable. We suppose, and not without reason, that professed interpreters succeed no better in their inquiries into this subject, than those who are only assisted by good sense. The proof of this is at hand; the former agree much less with one another, than the latter. This is saying too little.

" it requires me to believe, are better informed than
 " I am myself?—I am thoroughly versed in the
 " scripture, will you say? I have made it my study
 " for a long time, I know the genius of the oriental
 " tongues.——Very well. Upon this foot, all those
 " who are versed in this study, have made the same
 " discoveries; and they agree no doubt in their in-
 " terpretations.——Far from it: their interpretati-
 " ons are as opposite as light from darkness; but the
 " reason of it is, that some of them are mistaken.——
 " And pray, who shall decide which of these inter-
 " preters is the ablest?—
 " Let us conclude from thence, that no man has
 " a right to decide for another, what the scripture
 " requires him to believe: otherwise that man,
 " whoever he be, assumes the place of the scripture,
 " he would have me see with his eyes, he determines
 " for me*. The conclusion leads us to another, viz:
 " that no man is obliged to see in the scripture, any
 " thing besides what he can see in it.
 " From hence it will follow, that the capacity of
 " men, or their point in view, differing very much,
 " some will see, or imagine they see in the scripture,
 " what others do not, and cannot possibly see.——It
 " will likewise follow, that far from making it a duty
 " to be directed by others, in our way of considering
 " such or such a point of doctrine, every man will in
 " conscience be obliged to content himself with what
 " appears to himself to be true, at least actually, and

* Setting aside things obscure, the divines will not
 want matter enough to employ them. How many e-
 vident and moral truths are there, some relating to the
 nature of God, others to that of man! these afford an
 ample field for study, and an inexhaustible subject for in-
 struction.

“ that all complaisance in this respect would be laid
 “ aside.

“ From hence it is easy to perceive how very false,
 “ and even unjust it is, to pretend to make other men
 “ adopt our opinions, under the pain of taxing as
 “ erroneous and dangerous all those opinions which
 “ depart from ours. Would it not be more equita-
 “ ble, more suitable to men who are always liable to
 “ mistakes, to value and respect in other persons,
 “ that liberty which God himself will not force, to
 “ give every person leave to see things with his own
 “ eyes, to see them by himself and for himself. For
 “ this is an essential remark, that every man ought
 “ to be content with deciding for himself, and de-
 “ ciding only in proportion to the evidence of things.

“ After this, a question might be started, that
 “ might make a great difference in the way of con-
 “ sidering the obscure expressions of scripture. It is
 “ concerning the manner in which the divines pretend
 “ it was dictated.

“ The question is, to know whether they pretend
 “ that it was dictated word for word by divine inspi-
 “ ration, even down to the syllables and accents; or
 “ whether it was only dictated by way of direction;
 “ and with respect to the substance of things; so that
 “ the sacred writers did themselves furnish such ex-
 “ pressions as they thought proper.

“ If they understand it in this last sense, they will
 “ own, that I am not obliged to be scrupulously nice
 “ about all the words of the scripture, that some of
 “ them may only express improperly the thought
 “ of the prophets or apostles; or that expressions
 “ which were proper at that time, are no more used,
 “ nor perhaps understood in the age we live in. They
 “ will own, I say, that if the divine inspiration took

" place only as to the substance of things, without
" extending to the expressions ; I am in like manner
" obliged only to be attentive to, and regard the
" substance and spirit of things, without putting my
" mind upon the rack to reconcile whatever may be
" inconsistent or contradictory in the expressions.

" If there are any divines, who pretend that not
" only the substance of things, but likewise that all
" the expressions were dictated by divine inspirati-
" on *, what shall I be reduced to in this case ? will
" it be to suppose that God can contradict himself :
" ought I to give it a sense quite repugnant to the
" idea of supreme perfection ? can it really be ima-
" gined, that it is shewing a respect and regard to
" that book, to impute to it a language quite unwor-
" thy of God ? would it not be more reasonable,
" more respectful to him who is considered as author
" of it, to leave in the class of things obscure, all
" mysteries, every thing that bears not a mark of
" evidence, that does not give a positive sense, a
" sense that shews itself, without requiring strained
" efforts to discover it.

" In reality, what can the Author of my being re-
" quire of me, unless it be to employ the free and
" intelligent capacity which I have received from
" him, by sincerely acquiescing in every thing that
" appears to me to be truth.

" This being supposed, it may happen, that I shall
" not always be able to discover in the scripture,
" whatever another person thinks he discovers in it.
" But however, if that other person acts with sinceri-
" ty in his inquiry, he fulfils his task by acquiescing

* This perhaps is what it is easier to suppose, than to prove.

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"in what appears to him to be evident, and I too
 "fulfil mine, by suspending my judgment, as to what
 "appears to me to be doubtful. It is enough, in short, if he and I believe every
 "thing we can believe to be true, and if we act ac-
 "cordingly. This, I think, is a religion which no
 "controversy can shake."

* Whether such a religion is dangerous, we do not pre-
 tend to determine. What is certain, is, that it is not an
 easy matter to discover when the mischief is most to be
 feared. Is it in this world, or in the other? with regard
 to this life, there are people who believe that such a dispo-
 sition would not be hurtful, but on the contrary would pa-
 cify many disturbances. With regard to the life to come,
 I am inclined to think that it would likewise be of no pre-
 judice.

THE END.

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